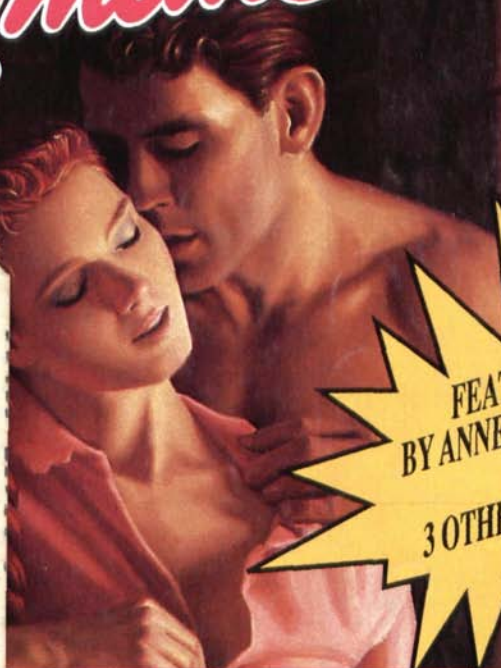


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ANNETTE BROADRICK
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The Sweetest of Debts



ANNETTE BROADRICK

Annette Broadrick believes in romance, the magic of life. Since 1984, when her book was published, Annette has been delighting her readers with her imagination and innovative style. Among the numerous awards she has received is the *Romantic Times* Lifetime Achievement Award for Series Romance.

DIANA PALMER

In 1993, Diana Palmer celebrated the publication of her 50th novel for Silhouette Books. Diana Palmer's first romance novel for Silhouette Books was published in 1982. In California's *Affaire de Coeur*, she was listed as one of the top ten romance authors in the country. She is the winner of five national Waldenbooks Romance Bestseller Awards and two national B. Dalton Books Bestseller Awards.



GINNA GRAY

A native Houstonian, Ginna Gray admits that since childhood, she has been a compulsive reader as well as a head-in-the-clouds dreamer. Long accustomed to expressing her creativity in tangible ways, she finally decided to put her fantasies and wild imaginings down on paper. The result is *The Mother of Two*. The mother of two now spends eight hours a day as a full-time writer.

BARBARA BRETTON

Barbara Bretton's published works range from stories in Katy Keene comic books—written when she was ten years old—to newspaper and magazine articles, to contemporary and historical romances. A full-time writer, she is the author of over a score of bestselling novels. Barbara currently makes her home in suburban New Jersey, with her husband and their exotic birds.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Although Spring is in the air, it still feels cool enough to have a romantic evening for two by the fireplace--which is just what I plan to do!

I always find as winter slowly trickles away that spring brings a special warmth and lightness to my heart--just the right mood to experience...a cool beauty who possesses an explosive passion that only one man can ignite...a disillusioned woman shown that love with a special man can heal, restore and renew...a captured heart that accepts all or nothing from the man who holds hers...a visionary shown her heart's desire and the knowledge that she must save him or be heartbroken!

Curl up with this month's volume of the World's Best Romances and join me in making this Spring a time for love!

Best Wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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ANNETTE BROADRICK

Adam's Story



**Adam St. Clair fell in love with Caitlin Moran
after she saved his life. Could he convince her
that a future together was in the cards?**



Adam St. Clair paused outside his luxury hotel to look up and down the Monterrey, Mexico, thoroughfare. The February wind off the mountains made him raise the collar of his sheepskin-lined denim jacket and settle his Stetson more firmly on his head. Hunching his shoulders, Adam started toward his car.

Tonight was the night. He wasn't sure how he knew exactly. He'd followed countless leads since joining the agency that was trying to stop the flood of drugs crossing the border into the United States. Most of those leads had led nowhere. Some had gotten him into the circle of men who made their living bringing drugs in from South America.

He'd had no trouble with his cover. Playing the part of a Texas rancher came naturally—that's what he'd always been. But two years ago, he'd also become a man determined to do what he could for his country.

If all went well tonight, he'd have the information necessary to nail one of the leaders, unless the informant changed his mind.

He sat in his car for a few minutes, waiting for the heater to warm the interior. He had several hours of hard driving to do, back into the remote area of the mountains.

Adam had removed his hat and now he ran his hand through his tawny hair, causing the waves to fall into curls across his forehead. His sister, Felicia, had always teased him about his curls. His mouth lifted into a slight smile at the memory.

He forced his thoughts back to the job at hand. Adam knew that what he was doing was dangerous, and felt a twinge of guilt that he'd never told Felicia about this part of his life. But there was no rea-

son for her to be involved. Since she'd been living in Los Angeles for several years, he'd had no need to explain his periodic trips to Mexico.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to go.

HER EYES flew open, and Caitlin Moran sat up in bed. She looked around her one-room cabin, trying to decide what had awakened her. The darkness outside showed no sign of impending dawn.

Caitlin continued to sit there, listening intently. Something was wrong. She slid out of bed, absently pulled on her heavy robe to offset the February chill of the mountains and padded to the window.

She could see nothing in the clearing except the heavy frost that tinted the blades of grass silver. Nothing moved. She could hear no sound of an intruder.

Disturbed, but unsure why, Caitlin turned away from the window and walked over to the stone fireplace. Coals still glowed brightly through the ashes. She added more wood and watched hungry tongues of flame suddenly lick the new additions, making them smolder, then glow.

Caitlin stood there warming her hands. What could be wrong?

She received no answers. Reluctantly, she crawled back into bed, pulling up the blankets.

Caitlin wasn't alarmed because she was alone. She had lived in her small cabin, high in the mountains near Monterrey, for more than five years. Being alone was a way of life she had chosen.

Staring up at the roof over her head, she tried to calm her mind, willing herself to fall asleep again.

Instead, scenes of violence began to race across the screen of her mind. She saw two cars traveling fast over twisting and narrow mountain roads, their headlights blinding.

A shadowed face appeared, indistinct at first, but with concentration Caitlin began to see more details. Gray-green eyes with a look of determination and agitation stared back at her, a frown making the brows draw together over a well-formed nose. A strong jawline was clenched, the lines around the tight-lipped mouth making deep grooves in the face.

Caitlin had never seen the man before, but she would never forget him.

Who was he? Tawny curls fell across his forehead, giving a deceptively boyish look to an otherwise stern face. She tried to get more, but nothing came. She sighed, frustrated by her ability to see so much that she didn't want to see, and her inability to pick up more when she tried.

She had lived with her frustration long enough to know there was little she could do to rid her mind of the pictures and messages she received. She had tried. Desperately.

She forced herself to turn over, trying to clear her mind. Instead she began to remember how she had slowly made a place for herself in these mountains.

About once a month she began to take the vegetables she had grown and her handwoven rugs and fabrics down to the small settlement a few miles from her cabin. There she would trade for supplies.

The people of the village at first stared at her reddish-gold hair and blue eyes with distrust. Why was she living there? What did she want?

How could she explain to them that she was searching for some answers? She was looking for her sanity, her belief in herself. By the time she'd finally been released from the hospital, she'd known her life would never be the same again. Her loving parents were gone. Friendships

had evaporated, and the man she loved had withdrawn from her.

The stoic natives would probably not be impressed to know that she had run from the world and chosen their small corner of the universe to find peace.

Caitlin had been grateful for the many summers she had spent with her aunt in San Antonio. She had enjoyed learning Spanish and by the time she returned to Seattle each fall, she had continued to increase her grasp of the language. Now she couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken English. Probably not since her aunt had passed away.

Caitlin had grown used to the villagers. She understood and identified with their need for privacy. They didn't bother her, and she didn't bother them.

She remembered the day she had been on her way out of the village, leading her burro, when she heard a baby crying. There was no baby near her, yet she heard the choked whimpering very clearly in her head.

Since she had moved to the mountains, the pictures and impressions she kept seeing had slowly disappeared. Now they were back, and she wasn't sure what to do.

The choked crying of the baby seemed to fill her mind once more, and Caitlin made her decision. She began to thread her way through the streets in an effort to locate the infant.

When she paused in front of a small house, there was no actual sound coming from within. Yet she felt certain the baby was inside. She could see in her mind's eye the baby being held in its mother's arms.

Caitlin tapped on the door. After a long moment, a young woman with tired, reddened eyes peered out at her. In Spanish, Caitlin said, "Your baby is ill?"

"Oh, yes! I fear he is dying!" was the reply.

"May I help?" Caitlin reached into her cloth bag and pulled out a smaller one.

"I have had some experience in healing with these herbs."

When Caitlin stepped into the dimly lit room, she saw the other women, sitting in a circle around the infant, weeping.

The poor child struggled for every breath. He seemed incapable of crying at this point. Caitlin asked for boiling water, and as soon as it was brought to her, she crushed some leaves into it and quickly made a tent with a blanket lying nearby. She held the baby, sitting under the blanket and breathing with him, absorbing the aromatic fumes.

Then she began to croon to him, rubbing her hands over his body and talking to him in a low voice, explaining that breathing was easy, part of life, that there was nothing to fear from life, that he would enjoy it.

Caitlin requested that hot water continually be added, and she held the baby upright, forcing his lungs to expel the fluids that were strangling him. When he began to cough, she helped him rid himself of the life-threatening substance.

Time meant nothing to her as she worked with the baby. Slowly his breathing eased, and his temperature lowered. His color improved, and after several hours he dropped off into a deep, healing sleep.

When Caitlin stood up to place him in his bed, she turned and looked at the mother with a smile. "What is your baby's name?"

"Miguel."

Caitlin gently stroked the infant's back.

"I believe Miguel will be all right now. When he awakens, make him a liquid from soaking these leaves in boiling water for five minutes. Give him this much—" she showed the woman "—every two hours. By tomorrow he will be ready to eat again."

A clamoring of voices broke out from all the women, but Caitlin was too tired to decipher what they were saying.

Clearly, they were elated with her success.

She began to back out of the room, saying over and over, "*De nada, de nada.*"

The next day Antonio, Miguel's father, appeared at her door, together with his father and two brothers, asking what they could do to pay her for saving the young child's life. She tried to explain they owed her nothing, but they insisted. When they saw how simply she was living, they told her they would bring her new furniture.

And they had. Over the months each one had shown up at her doorstep with a new offering—a beautifully carved bed, a small round table with four matching chairs, a rocker.

Eventually the surrounding mountainside heard the story of the fair-haired healer who knew mysterious ways to use the plants of the fields and forests to bring strength and peace to a troubled body and soul. Caitlin felt truly blessed to have found what she could do with her life. And she was content....

She was almost asleep, when suddenly, an image of the same face leaped into her mind, a look of dread and horror in its taut expression.

Caitlin involuntarily screamed, "No!"

She shook with the intensity of the feeling that gripped her. The man was in danger. But where was he?

Throwing back the covers, she leapt up and pulled on jeans and a shirt, then socks and her hiking boots.

Grabbing her heavy hooded coat and the bag she always carried, Caitlin stepped outside.

The crude shelter that protected Arturo, her burro, lay several yards from her front door, and she hastened toward his stall. She found his bridle and blanket, then grabbed his halter and led him away from the warmth of his home, much to his loudly voiced irritation.

"Oh, hush, Arturo," she scolded. "It won't be long until dawn, anyway. So we're getting an early start on the day."

Caitlin hurried down the path, leading the burro and trying to get her bearings.

A desperate sense of urgency pushed her on, but she couldn't pinpoint where it was leading her. She was moving away from the village, even farther away than her own home, which was isolated.

The path narrowed to no more than a trail where deer and other animals followed the mountain ridge over into the next valley.

Caitlin had never been here before. As far as she knew, no one lived in these parts. But coming over a ridge, she saw a light moving in the distance. She paused, watching the headlights of two cars.

One vehicle seemed to be chasing the other through the mountain stillness, following twisting, turning roads. She remembered seeing them earlier in her mind. She tied Arturo to a young sapling and hurried toward the lights.

She watched with mounting horror while one car began to ram the back of the other, making the driver lose control. The lead car careened back and forth, grazed a tree, then rolled as though in slow motion, coming to rest at the edge of the steep precipice.

From her position, Caitlin watched in horror as the scene continued to unfold. She broke into a run, then abruptly halted when two men leapt out of the second vehicle and ran to the other car. Their voices carried in the night.

"Where is he? Is he dead?" one asked in Spanish.

"I don't know. Wait! Here he is. He was thrown out."

She saw a flash, as though from a camera.

"Is he dead?"

"If not, he will be soon enough. Let's get that car over the side. If anyone finds

him, they'll think he was just driving too fast and lost control."

Caitlin could hardly believe what she was hearing. She continued down the mountainside, a sense of helplessness overwhelming her. Not only was she outnumbered, she had a hunch those two wouldn't hesitate to kill her if they knew she'd been a witness. She watched as the men pushed on the car until it toppled over the side and exploded on impact.

The noise shook the ground, and Caitlin grabbed the limb of a nearby tree to keep her balance.

She heard one of them say, "Let's roll him over the side," just as Arturo protested the noise, the night, and being left alone. Caitlin froze.

One of them glanced up in her direction.

"What was that?"

"Who knows? There's all kinds of animals out here."

The other man headed back to the car. "Let's go. Nobody's going to find him here, anyway."

Caitlin saw the first man bend over the motionless form. After a moment, he stood up and shrugged. "No matter. He's dead, anyway."

The car turned around and left, returning the way it had come. Caitlin felt paralyzed with shock. In all her experience, she had never witnessed anything so deliberately cruel and callous.

She went on down the hillside, now having no trouble distinguishing where she was going. Unnoticed, the sky had begun to lighten, signaling a new day.

As soon as she reached the injured man's side, she fell to her knees.

His skin was icy, and her heart sank. She felt for a pulse, but her hand was shaking so much she couldn't find any sign of life. His clothes were covered with dirt, his features all but obscured by blood.

She couldn't leave him lying there while she went for help. It would take her

hours. He needed help now, unless it was already too late.

Making up her mind, Caitlin began to climb the mountain once again. She would bring Arturo down and attempt to take the man to the village.

Perhaps it was too late to save him, but he deserved a decent burial.

Decent. The word seemed to ring in her head. He had been a decent man. A kind man. A man who had not deserved to die this way.

By the time Caitlin reached Arturo, tears cascaded down her cheeks. There were many times when she found life particularly puzzling. Now was one of those times. Why had she seen him so clearly if she wasn't going to be given the opportunity to save him?

She dried her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. Whatever the reason, she was there, and she was going to see that he wasn't abandoned. Turning, she guided the burro back down the side of the mountain.

With infinite care and tenderness, she straightened the unknown man's legs and turned him so that he was lying on his back. She knelt and began to wipe the blood away from his face. It had come from a gash across his forehead, just beneath his hairline.

There was no expression on his face. He looked as though he were asleep. He had a beautiful face—clean, clearly defined, with high cheekbones and a strong jawline. His lips, in repose, looked as though they were made for smiling.

She sat and stared at him for a few moments until she realized she was wasting time. Then she placed her arms around him, her head resting on his chest where his coat had fallen open, in an attempt to get him upright.

She froze, her eyes closing in a spasm of excitement. An almost indiscernible rhythm had reached her ear.

It was a heartbeat.

*

NEVER HAD a place looked so good to her as her own clearing once they arrived. Caitlin wasn't sure where she had found the strength to get the man onto Arturo's back, so now she led the burro inside and slid the unconscious man onto the bed.

He hadn't moved. His skin felt clammy to the touch, and his gray color evinced his state of shock.

"But you're alive," she whispered. "You're going to make it."

Searching in her bag for her penlight, Caitlin carefully lifted each of the man's eyelids, shining the light into his pupils and watching them retract slightly. The movement was sluggish, but at least there was some response, thank God. There was no doubt that he suffered from a concussion, but his brain was still functioning.

The gash on his head no longer bled, and Caitlin knew she would have to stitch it, but not until she could clean and disinfect it.

First things first. She had to get him out of his coat and boots, and try to make him more comfortable. From her quick check before she'd loaded him onto Arturo, he had no broken bones, for which she was thankful. His head injury was serious enough.

When she slipped his arm out of his coat sleeve, Caitlin flinched at the sight of a shoulder holster under his arm. She wondered how many law-abiding people wore them. *Or get run off the road, for that matter.* She unfastened the holster and pulled it away from him, staring at the pistol in it. She didn't know what to do with it.

Was he dangerous? When he came to, would he try to kill her?

No. He was a decent man. Somehow she knew that. But whatever he was mixed up in was highly dangerous. She was a witness to that.

With sudden decision she wrapped the gun in a towel and hid it in her suitcase. Then she returned to the man lying unconscious on her bed.

ADAM THOUGHT he was dreaming when he finally managed to focus his eyes. And he felt as though an oversize sledgehammer was continually tapping on his skull. It was difficult to concentrate.

The rustic cabin he seemed to occupy was immaculate, the furnishings sparse. Except for the statue of a small deer in front of the fireplace, there was no ornamentation, unless he counted the woman.

The glow from the fire tinted her skin apricot. She stood with her back to him, wearing a pair of panties that covered a deliciously curved derriere. Her long reddish-blond hair fell to her waist in waves and curls.

He watched her as she dressed, unaware of him. Who was she? And what was he doing here?

His last memory was sitting in his car in front of his hotel in Monterrey. He'd had something important to do. What was it?

The throbbing pain increased when he frowned. He touched his forehead and felt a large welt that was extremely tender. On his jaw, he felt the roughness of a beard.

She turned toward him, reaching for her blouse. She had very delicate features. Her eyes were framed with dark lashes, and very blue.

"Who are you?" he said, his voice husky.

She grabbed her blouse to her breast in surprise, and turning her back to him, tugged it on, then a pair of jeans. Walking over to the bed, she sat down beside him and took his hand.

"I'm Caitlin," she said, smiling. "Who are you?"

The room kept receding from him and he blinked. "Adam," he finally muttered, his throat dry.

"Adam," she repeated slowly. At last she had a name for him. She liked it. "You're going to be fine, Adam. You got a nasty blow to your head, though." She reached up and brushed his hair from his forehead, careful not to touch his wound.

He couldn't think. Her touch felt so soothing; it went with the sound of her voice, which was so familiar, the tone as gentle as her touch. . . . Adam drifted off to sleep, his expression serene.

Time didn't seem to have any meaning to him, and he kept fading in and out of consciousness. He would open his eyes to daylight, close them, then reopen them to deep shadows. But he was always aware of her presence. What had she said her name was? Caitlin, that was it. Caitlin with the soft voice and soothing hands.

Vaguely he was aware of her instructions to eat. From some distant place she urged him to turn so that she could stroke him with a warm, wet cloth, offering a balm to his aching body. He tried to tell her he could bathe himself, but somehow he couldn't find the words. *Takes too much concentration.*

Caitlin—beautiful angel of mercy and light, who kept the dark shadows away. How long had he known her? She seemed to be an integral part of his life.

Once he woke up to find her sleeping curled up by his side. He smiled. Shifting slightly, he moved so that his hand could touch her arm. He found the closeness comforting.

Sometime during those many hours, Caitlin became a part of his thoughts, whether he was conscious or unconscious. Her presence kept the fear and confusion he was experiencing at bay.

Caitlin.

At last the day came when Adam could focus without the hazy double vision that had plagued him. He lay there quietly looking around the now familiar room.

At first he didn't see Caitlin, then she moved into his line of vision. Her reddish-blond hair hung in a single braid across her shoulder, and he smiled at the

tranquil picture she made placing wood on the fire.

When she moved away from the fireplace, he tried to keep her in sight by turning his head—a mistake as he discovered when the pain in his head magnified.

But Caitlin glanced up, and when she saw him watching her, she smiled, making her eyes sparkle.

"How do you feel?" she asked, taking his hand in hers.

"Like my head's been used for batting practice," he managed to say. "Where are we?" he asked, his curiosity finally piqued.

"The mountains. In Mexico."

"What am I doing here?"

"You were badly injured not too far from here. Since there's no town nearby, I brought you to my home to help you recover."

He thought about that for a moment. He knew he was hurt. He'd never felt so much pain before.

Her hand continued to hold his firmly. She was smiling as though immensely pleased with him. He idly wondered why.

"How long have I been here?" *Forever, surely. Was there ever a time when you and I weren't together?*

"I'm not sure, exactly. I'm afraid I lost track of time... you've been so ill."

Not that it mattered. He was content to lie there looking at her very lovely, expressive face.

Caitlin was touched by his tender expression. And slightly alarmed. He mustn't grow attached to her. She felt the inner warning that she was too late—her loving care of him had created a bond between them.

"Where do you live, Adam?" she asked then, gently releasing his hand and folding her own together.

Adam had to think about her question for a moment. His home. Where was it? "On a ranch... in Texas. Near Mason." His eyes sought hers. "Do you know where that is?"

He watched her as she shook her head. That was all right. He'd show her someday, when he felt better.

"What are you doing here in Mexico, Adam?"

Good question. He frowned once again.

Car lights shining in the rearview mirror. He'd been going somewhere, meeting someone... Danger.

With a sudden start Adam felt along his side.

"Where's my pistol?"

"I put it in my suitcase, where it would be safe," she said.

The pistol didn't need to be safe. *They* needed to be safe. They would be safer if he had the gun nearby.

"How long have I known you?"

Unconsciously Caitlin reached for his hand once more. "Just since the accident."

"You don't know why I'm here?"

"Not very clearly, I'm afraid. I've picked up that you were on your way to meet someone important to you, and you never made it."

"What do you mean, 'picked up'?"

Her grip on his hand tightened, and he watched several expressions move across her face.

"I see pictures in my head," she said in a hesitant voice. "That's how I knew about you, that you were nearby, that you would be hurt."

She wasn't making much sense. But then, nothing made much sense to him at the moment.

"You mean my accident."

"Yes, except that it wasn't an accident. You were forced off the road and almost killed."

Bright lights reflected in a rearview mirror, almost blinding him... Yes. He remembered now. He didn't know where they came from. Suddenly they were behind him, coming up fast.... She had been there. She... "You saved my life," he said.

Caitlin felt as though she were drowning in the gray-green eyes that gazed up at her.

"I'm glad I was able to," she managed to say.

They studied each other in silence for a while, then Adam's thoughts seemed to drift. He stirred restlessly. "Somehow I have to tell them—"

"I know. There are people who need to know that you're alive," Caitlin responded. "But they will wait, Adam. First, you need to mend."

His eyes drooped shut. "So tired."

Without considering her actions, she leaned down and kissed his cheek. "I know. Go to sleep now. You have plenty of time. The worst is behind you."

Adam smiled at her touch. He loved her soft scent, her warm touch, her tranquil presence. He loved...

The next time he opened his eyes the room was in shadows. Caitlin sat in a small rocker before the fire, doing hand-work.

"Do you live here alone?" he asked.

She glanced around, then came over to his side, automatically touching his hand, then his cheek. "Not totally. Chula keeps me company from time to time." She nodded to the deer statue in front of the fireplace.

Adam frowned, as she went to the kitchen area where she picked up a small bag. Returning to the fireplace, Caitlin took some oats from the bag, placing them in a small bowl.

His eyes widened when the statue unfolded its legs and got up, stepping daintily across the rug to eat.

He began to understand how Alice must have felt when she stepped through the looking glass.

Caitlin brought him a bowl of stew and sat down beside him. When he finished the last spoonful of food, she said, "Why don't you rest now?"

Adam frowned. "All I do is sleep."

"I know, but it's the best thing for you. You're making excellent progress, you know."

His mind returned to the cause of his injuries.

"Did you see what happened to me?"

Caitlin nodded, her expression somber.

"Tell me everything you can remember."

Once again she took his hand, unobtrusively keeping watch over his pulse. He didn't need to get upset. As briefly as possible, she explained what she had witnessed.

When she fell silent, Adam lay there, staring into space. Two men tried to kill him. Why? How had they known about the meeting with the possible informer?

And how was he going to find them?

"Did you get a look at the men?"

"Not a clear look, but I would know them again."

He wished he understood how Caitlin had known what was going to happen. And how could she identify two men she'd only seen in the dark? He couldn't deny that there was something different about her.... Adam drifted off to sleep once more.

Caitlin watched him for a long time, grateful to see that he was resting easier. A tea that she had given him should help to combat his pain.

With any luck at all, he would sleep through the night. She smiled to herself, wondering what she would do if he woke up sometime and found her by his side? Once he was awake more, she would get the sleeping bag out and sleep near the fire. He must not think she wanted anything more from him.

Caitlin had been aware of his thoughts earlier. He was attracted to her, just as she was attracted to him. But it would be better left unacknowledged. His life existed outside of the mountains. She had no desire ever to leave them.

She already knew that Adam would hold a very special place in her heart.

And why not? A person didn't save another's life every day.

Caitlin lay awake for several hours that night, thinking of Adam. There was a reason he'd come into her life, a lesson she would learn from the experience. She only hoped it didn't involve more pain than she could handle.

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AS THE DAYS slowly passed, Adam's returning strength became apparent. He stayed up longer now than he spent in bed. Adam found a quiet pleasure in following Caitlin around as she worked outside, feeding the burro, milking the goat, gathering eggs, as well as feeding half the wildlife in the mountains.

He was surprised to discover the number of people who called on her, either to bring her items in payment for her assistance or to ask for herbal remedies.

At first the local people were shy around him, but as the days passed, they seemed to take the presence of the tall, quiet Texan for granted.

On one rather warm day Adam sat outside in the sunshine and watched Caitlin prepare her garden for spring planting.

Spring. It certainly felt that way today. How long had he been there?

He knew that several weeks had gone by. The weather had warmed considerably since he first came to Mexico. No doubt everyone knew he was missing by now. Why had no one come looking for him?

Maybe they had. How could anyone have found him up here? He would have to find a way back to Monterrey. Soon. But not today.

Adam glanced up at the sound of Caitlin's laughter. Chula was nudging her with her nose. He smiled at the picture she made, playing with the deer. She seemed so content with her life, so innocent in many ways.

She was different from anyone he had ever known. A very special person. What was it she had told him about seeing pictures in her mind? Knowing when something was going to happen? There was a word for it. Psychic. She was psychic.

"Caitlin?"

The sound of his voice seemed to startle her. "Yes?" She walked over to where he sat. He had shaved that morning for the first time, and Caitlin couldn't control her reaction to his good looks. She tried to cover her feelings by saying, "All you need is a sombrero, and you'd be part of the land of *mañana*." He smiled.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I need to get some exercise. Could we take a short walk?"

"Where would you like to go?" she asked.

"How about showing me where you found me?"

She shook her head. "I really think that's too far for you to walk. But we can start out in that direction."

Adam soon discovered what she meant. He was more than ready to rest when she suggested they sit down. "Don't you ever get lonely living up here?" he asked.

"Loneliness is a state of mind. The loneliest time of my life occurred when I lived in the city of Seattle."

"Ah—so you didn't suddenly appear here on the planet and choose this place to reside."

She laughed at his whimsy.

"I'm afraid not. Is that what you thought?"

"I'm not sure what to think about you."

She grinned. "I take it you're not used to people who know what you're thinking."

He shook his head. "Sorry, I can't buy that one. I'm still trying to get used to the idea you saw what happened to me before it occurred."

Caitlin gazed out over the vista of mountains and trees. "You've been try-

ing to figure a way to ask me to go home with you."

Her quiet words caught him unprepared, but before he could comment, she continued. "The feelings you've been having about me are very natural, Adam, but don't mistake gratitude for something else."

"How do you know what I'm thinking and feeling?" he demanded.

"Partly because I was once very ill myself. It's easy to become dependent on those who are caring for you."

"You think that's why I'm attracted to you?" he asked.

"I know there's a sexual awareness between us. It's very strong."

"But you don't intend to do anything about it, do you? You see me only as your patient, is that it?"

"I believe that's the wisest course to follow, yes. We come from different worlds. It's better not to get too involved."

"What's wrong with my world?"

"Nothing," she replied. "But the world you live in is too painful for me."

"In what way?"

"People don't want their thoughts and emotions revealed. They need their masks to face life."

"Only people who have something to hide."

"We all have something to hide."

"What do you hide, Caitlin?" he asked softly.

"Fear," she said. "Fear of rejection. Fear of being hurt."

"So you stay up here where you're safe."

"Yes."

He stood up and held out his hand. "Let's go home."

ADAM STAYED outside most of the next day. He was definitely on the mend. His body could attest to that. Just thinking about Caitlin created certain body changes that were uncomfortable as well as embarrassing. He had never wanted

another woman the way he wanted Caitlin, and yet he had never even kissed her.

Since he'd moved out of her bed—he smiled when he recalled how that had happened—they had carefully avoided physical contact.

He sat down at the table, thinking about the night he'd seen her dragging out a sleeping bag.

"What are you doing?" he'd asked, frowning.

She seemed surprised. "Going to bed. Why?"

"You don't have to sleep on the floor." Caitlin registered no expression. "Yes, I do."

"Since when? You've seemed quite comfortable curled up by my side."

He watched a lovely flow of color in her face. "I didn't realize you knew I was there," she murmured, and knelt on the sleeping bag.

Adam spoke again. "If anyone's going to bed down on the floor, it will be me."

She looked up at him with dismay. "You won't be able to sleep down here. And you need your rest, Adam."

He'd continued to look at her until she'd gotten up and reluctantly walked over to the bed....

Adam lay in front of the fireplace late that night, unable to sleep. He heard the quiet rustling of covers and knew Caitlin was no more asleep than he was.

"Caitlin? Can't you sleep?"

There was a short silence, then a sigh. "Not really. Would you like me to make us something to drink?"

"Sounds good to me."

He could hear her pour water into a pan, stoke up the stove, hear the clatter of cups. After a while she appeared beside him, holding out a cup.

He sat up to take it, and she sat down in her rocking chair. Caitlin wore her hooded velour robe, its navy blue color emphasizing the red of her hair and the fairness of her complexion. She gazed at the fire.

"Have you ever been in love, Caitlin?"

Her gaze moved from the flames until her eyes met his. "I thought I was... once."

"Tell me about it."

"Rick and I became engaged our sophomore year of college." Her gaze returned to the fire. "We were both only children and spoiled—although unaware of that, of course. We'd had happy childhoods—things had always happened the way we wanted them to. We were going to marry after graduation, wait three years to have children—"

She stopped speaking and made a slight dismissing gesture with her hand.

"It didn't work out that way." She watched the dancing flames. "The accident ended everything."

"What sort of accident?"

"Mom, Dad and I were on our way home from a football game when we were hit head-on by a speeding car. I happened to be in the back seat. That's what saved me. They say Mom was killed instantly and Dad died at the hospital."

"My God!"

"I was in a coma for several weeks. When I began to come out of it I 'saw' the accident happen, as though I was a witness. Then I 'watched' Rick when he heard of the accident. I saw him visit me in the intensive care unit while I was unconscious."

"Is that when you developed your psychic abilities?"

"No. They were just there after the accident. When I regained consciousness, I knew what the doctors were going to say before they said it. More importantly, I knew what they weren't saying."

"How did Rick take the change in you?" Adam asked.

"He was appalled when he discovered that I could tell what he was thinking and feeling, particularly when it was contrary to what he was saying. That's when I knew our relationship was over, and

that at best, it had been a very shallow one."

"What happened then?"

"Eventually I was well enough to go home. Only there was no home for me. And I didn't understand what had happened to me. I was not only trying to come to terms with my grief, but I was also convinced I was losing my mind."

They sat in silence, and Caitlin realized that she was experiencing a sense of security she hadn't felt since her parents' deaths.

Adam propped himself up on one elbow. "I don't believe you were losing your mind. In my line of work our intuitive powers are often the only thing that saves us. Obviously your abilities were enhanced in some way. But that doesn't make them any less real."

"What is your line of work, Adam?"

He smiled. "I assumed you already knew that."

"I know you're not what you appear to be. You have a secret life that few people know about. You're a decent, honest man, but you don't let many people get close to you."

Adam's eyes narrowed slightly. "I can see why your friends would be uneasy. A person can't have any secrets from you."

"I don't know why you carry a gun," she said.

He studied her in silence for a few moments.

"Before I can explain that," he finally said, "I need to give you a little background." He paused. "The St. Clair ranch has been in my family for several generations," he began. "I was just a kid when my dad died, leaving my mom, sister and me to run it. Thank God we had a dependable foreman, or we'd never have made it. Mom died when I was a teenager, and I had to look after my sister, Felicia."

"Is she tall, blond, with green eyes?" Caitlin asked.

Adam grinned. "That's her."

"And she's in love with the man who runs the ranch with you?"

Adam abruptly sat up. "Dane Rineholt?"

"Is he part owner of the ranch?"

Slowly Adam relaxed. Caitlin's abilities were definitely unsettling. "Yes," he said, "as a matter of fact he is." In a musing tone he added, "So Felicia's in love with Dane. That explains a lot."

"Didn't you know?" She was surprised that he hadn't been aware of something that came to her so clearly. In her mind, she saw them together. "Is Felicia at the ranch now?"

Adam shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Caitlin could see Felicia at the ranch and feel her tremendous grief. She thought Adam was dead. She must have come home when she heard he was missing.

"She loves you very much," she murmured.

"No more than I love her." He stretched out on the sleeping bag. "Dane had been at the ranch a few years before I found out he was working with the authorities to help stop the drug smuggling across the border. It sounded exciting to me, and I insisted on getting in on it."

"Is that what you're doing down here now?"

"Yes. However, I've learned there's more drudgery than excitement, and more danger than I anticipated."

"Did those men who tried to kill you know who you were?"

"I wish I knew. I've been working undercover, getting involved with a group of smugglers. In the process other dealers have been pushed out." His gaze met hers. "Several factions could have wanted to get rid of me without even knowing I'm an agent."

Caitlin shivered. "You're lucky to be alive."

"Yes. But I wouldn't have made it without you." He studied her profile. "You never told me how you got from

Seattle to the mountains of Mexico. What made you move?"

"I had an aunt who lived in San Antonio. When I was younger, I spent part of my summer vacation with her. She loved the mountains, and we always went to Monterrey whenever I visited.

"During the months after the accident, I would remember the peace and serenity I'd always felt here."

"You escaped from the pressure of your new awareness."

"Yes."

"Caitlin, no one can escape life indefinitely."

"I'm not escaping from life. I have my own life here, and I'm content with it."

"Alone?" His intent gaze met hers.

"I enjoy being alone."

"You feel safer being alone, you mean." Adam slowly got to his feet. He took her hand, gently pulling her up to stand in front of him.

Cupping his hands around her face, he tilted her head so that she was looking up at him from only a few inches away. "You've allowed no room in your life for love," Adam said, pulling her closer while he did what he'd been wanting to do for days... weeks... a lifetime.

Adam kissed her. He took his time, lazily exploring her with his mouth, his hands, his entire body. She felt so good in his arms, better, if possible, than his dreams and imaginings had led him to believe. He knew in that moment that he never wanted to spend another day without her.

Caitlin felt as though she were in shock. She had forgotten how it felt to have someone's arms around her, hugging her. She hadn't known how it would feel to be pressed so closely to this man.

His kiss seemed to paralyze her, as though by his touch Adam had taken possession of her soul. No one had ever kissed her in the lazy yet very thorough way he was doing.

Was he aware of the growing feelings for him that had become a part of her?

Did he know what his touch was doing to her?

Sometime during that kiss Caitlin tentatively began to respond. Her tongue met his in a shy greeting, and she slid her arms timidly around his neck in an effort to get closer to him.

When her knees gave way, Adam lifted her in his arms and placed her on his sleeping bag. While one arm held her close to him, he slipped the robe from her shoulders.

Her voluminous flannel gown demurely buttoned from the waist to the ruffled neckline. Adam fumbled with the buttonholes for a moment, then slipped his hand inside her gown and felt the heat of her body against his palm.

Adam wanted her so badly he ached with it. When his hand slid to her breast and encircled it, he felt her body move convulsively.

"It's all right, love," he said in a low, gentle voice. "I want to love you, that's all." He leaned down and placed his mouth over the tip of her breast, his tongue playfully nudging the sensitive peak.

Deep-rooted alarms began to jangle within Caitlin. She had always been shy, even with Rick. She knew that once she gave herself to Adam she would never be the same again.

She lowered her trembling hands from around his neck so that she could move away from him. Instead, her hands slid to his hair, the soft curls wrapping around her fingers as he had managed to wrap himself around her heart.

Adam felt her stiffen, her hands restlessly clutching his head to her breast. Her rapid breathing resulted in a soft panting that he found extremely erotic. Reluctantly he raised his head and looked down at her flushed face and kiss-swollen lips. The expression in her eyes was so vulnerable that it almost brought tears to his.

She saw his eyes burning with desire and a deeper emotion that almost frightened her with its intensity.

"I love you, Caitlin."

The words scarcely made a ripple in the silence around them, but their impact was so profound they could have been shouted.

"You can't," she finally managed to say. "You mustn't."

"Why not?"

"It won't work."

"On the contrary, my love. I think you...me...us...work very well together." He glanced down at his hand where it rested lovingly cupped around her breast. "There's nothing to be afraid of, you know," he continued. "Loving someone is very natural. I think you'll find it quite enjoyable, once you get used to the idea."

Caitlin closed her eyes. "I can't, Adam. Don't ask that of me."

"Why not?" he finally asked, shifting away from her.

"Surely that's obvious. Our life-styles are not exactly compatible." She turned to watch the fire. "Somehow I can't see you spending the rest of your life here."

"And is this where you intend to spend the rest of your life, Caitlin?"

"Yes."

"I see," Adam finally said in a low voice.

Did he? Could he possibly see and understand the pain she had escaped from?

Caitlin knew that Adam wanted to make love to her. She didn't need her psychic abilities for that. She even knew that he was sincere. For now. Once he returned to his real life, he'd realize how out of place she would be.

"Your head hurts," Caitlin said, feeling his physical and emotional pain as though it were her own.

"Among other things," he acknowledged wryly.

She got up, slipped her robe back on and went to the stove. The water was still hot. She made him a drink from the

herbs that would ease his pain, silently handing him the cup.

Without thinking, he took a sip of the hot liquid, belatedly remembering its bitter taste. Somehow that fit his mood, and he quickly drained the contents, then stood up.

"I'll bring in more wood. You'd better try to get some sleep." He closed the door quietly behind him.

She hadn't wanted to hurt him. But wasn't it better to face reality now?

*

CAITLIN WOKE UP the next morning to the scent of freshly brewed coffee, and realized she had overslept. Adam had drawn the curtain that shielded the bed from the rest of the room, leaving that corner in shadows.

As soon as she was dressed, Caitlin slid the curtain back, unsurprised to discover herself alone in the cabin. Opening the door, she looked around the clearing, then wandered over into the lean-to. Adam was milking the goat.

"You have talents I never suspected," she said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

He had filled the pail and was setting it aside when she spoke. He glanced up at her, then looked away, but not before she saw the expression of love and hurt in his eyes.

"I thought you could use some help this morning," he responded, his tone even. Without looking at her, he said, "I'm leaving today."

She'd known that as soon as she opened her eyes, but hadn't wanted to face it.

"Can you tell me how to get to the village from here?"

"I'll show you. I don't think you'd find it otherwise. The path isn't defined."

Caitlin returned his pistol and holster to him, and after breakfast, they set out.

She set an easy pace, but by the time they reached the village, Adam knew he'd pushed himself. He was running on nerves and sheer willpower. There was no point in delaying his return to Texas. And there was a definite danger in staying. He loved Caitlin, but to share that cabin without making love to her was a torture he could not continue.

They walked along the main street, with Caitlin pointing out the shops, and ended up at a small tavern where Adam talked to the owner. He needed transportation north. Without money or identification, that might prove difficult.

"What's wrong?" Caitlin asked when he returned to their table.

"I hadn't realized how remote we are. There's very little traffic here. I'm going to have to stick around and take my chances on getting out."

Caitlin could see the lines of strain around his eyes. She felt the dull throb of pain in his head. This was too soon for him to be so active, but she knew he had to go.

They left the tavern, and Caitlin went to buy a few supplies. She had nothing more to do in the village.

"I really need to start back. It will be dark soon," she told Adam, and placed her hand on the sleeve of his coat. "Take care of yourself. God bless."

She turned and walked away, forcing herself not to glance back.

"Wait!" She turned to find him striding toward her. "I'll be damned if I'm going to tell you goodbye in the middle of some godforsaken Mexican settlement." He took her by the elbow and began to walk beside her. "I'll go partway with you."

Caitlin could feel her heart pounding. This was much harder than she could handle.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked. She nodded without looking at him.

"Aren't you even going to talk to me?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"How about 'I'm going to miss you, Adam'?"

She stopped. They were above the settlement now, out of sight of civilization. The western sun bathed him in a golden glow. She would never forget the way he looked at that moment. She forced herself to meet his gaze, her eyes filling with tears.

"I'm going to miss you, Adam," she managed to say.

With slow, deliberate movements, he slipped his arms around her, pulling her close to him. "I'm going to miss you, too, darlin'."

Caitlin rested her head against his chest. Her tears finally overflowed. "Oh, Adam," was all she could say.

Adam tilted her head so that his mouth found hers. He didn't know how he was going to walk away from her. She had become as necessary to him as the air that filled his lungs and gave him life. He loved her.

Caitlin felt as though she no longer had a will of her own. Her response to his kiss left no doubt in either one's mind that she shared his feelings.

The whine of a bullet and the cracking sound of the discharge came simultaneously, and Adam reacted automatically. He pushed Caitlin toward the ground, shoving her behind a boulder. Another shot was fired, and pieces of the rock ricocheted around them.

"Are you all right?" he whispered. She nodded.

The sudden attack left them both stunned. Violence had no business here, and yet it had found them.

"I've got to see who this is. Stay here, okay?"

Adam's gun was already in his hand, and he crept farther away from the trail, circling the area where the gunshots had been fired. It hadn't occurred to him that someone was still out to kill him. How had they traced him to the village? Now he'd walked right into their hands with-

out suspecting anything, making no attempt to cover his tracks.

Because of his carelessness he'd managed to involve Caitlin. Damn. A cold fury swept over him. He would find out who this was.

The woods were silent. The gunman had stopped firing. Adam paused, torn between going after him and getting Caitlin away from there. He couldn't take any chances with her life. He turned back to where he'd left her.

She sat huddled, head resting on her drawn-up knees. He knelt down beside her. "I've lost him for the moment," he whispered. "There's no telling who he is. He could have been sitting there in the tavern for all I know."

Caitlin raised her head, her face totally without color. Slowly she shook her head. "No, he wasn't. I would have noticed him." She paused. "He's the man who drove the car that forced you off the road."

Adam studied her intently, not liking the look of her eyes. She was going into shock. "Are you sure?"

"Reasonably."

"Damn! I wish I could see him... know who I'm looking for."

He stood, pulling her up, too. She winced and moved away from him. "Look, Adam. I'll go on back to the cabin. If you return to the village, maybe someone will be able to point him out. Everyone would know if there's a stranger in town. I should have thought to ask."

"I wasn't thinking very clearly myself today." All of his thoughts had been on the pain of leaving.

She tried to move away from him, but he still held her arm. "I don't want you continuing on that path." He guided her behind the rocks for some distance until he spotted a trail he had seen earlier. "Follow that until you get over the ridge. I'll be along shortly."

"There's no reason for you to come back to the cabin. You need to stay at the village. I'll be okay."

He saw no point in standing there debating the issue. He would see what he could find, then return to the cabin.

Without commenting on her statement, he leaned over and gently kissed her, then watched as she turned away and began to follow the path.

After thoroughly searching the area, Adam found nothing but some shell casings. Whoever it was must have decided to wait for another time.

Adam silently thanked him for the warning. He would be better prepared next time.

He started back up the trail. He had to know that Caitlin was all right.

Glancing down, he caught sight of color, and bent closer to examine what looked to be blood. He touched one of the small drops and confirmed his suspicion.

She'd been hit. And she hadn't even told him.

Damn her! Why hadn't she said something? He should have known that her shocked condition was more than just being scared. And now he remembered that she'd kept her arms across her chest, her hands tightly gripping her shoulders.

Her shoulder! Of course. He hadn't seen it because his mind had been on the gunman.

SHE HAD MADE considerable progress along the trail, but had stopped to rest.

She sat next to a large tree, her body braced against it, her head back and her eyes closed. Her hand still clutched her shoulder, but now the blood had soaked through her heavy handwoven shirt, and was dripping down her arm.

When Adam reached out to touch her, he absently noted that his hand was shaking. "Let me see," he said, his voice gruff.

Her eyes flew open. "What are you doing here?"

He knelt beside her. "Why didn't you tell me you were hurt, dammit?" he said. "How bad is it?"

"I'm all right, Adam. It's just a flesh wound," she said. "By the time I get some medication on it, I'll be fine. There was no reason for you to come back."

He lifted her shirt away, exposing her shoulder. The bullet had grazed her upper shoulder, leaving a jagged tear. He picked her up and started toward the cabin.

"Adam, don't carry me. You're in no condition—"

"If you know what's good for you, you won't say another word," he said through clenched jaws. "Not one... more... word."

By the time Adam reached the clearing, Caitlin was either asleep or unconscious. It was now dark. He shoved the cabin door open with his foot and felt his way over to the bed.

Adam lit the lamp, covered Caitlin with a blanket and built a fire.

He pumped some water into a bowl and made preparations to clean her wound. Quickly undressing her, he left only her panties, then covered her with a blanket, leaving the wounded area exposed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in a neutral tone, while he bathed and cleaned it.

"All right," she whispered.

The weakness in her voice filled him with pain, but there was no sense letting her know how upset he was. He tried to smile, but his lips barely moved.

"We've reversed our roles, I guess," she said in response to his smile.

"Looks that way."

"Adam, please don't feel you have to stay here with me. I know you need to get back to Monterrey."

"Dammit, Caitlin, don't you understand that things have changed now? Whoever is after me knows approximately where they can find me and that

"I'm with you. I can't go off and leave you unprotected."

"They don't want me. Even if they managed to find this cabin—which is doubtful—once they discovered you were gone, they'd have no further interest in me."

"A nice thought to hold." He got up and added wood to the fire. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Not particularly."

Caitlin was asleep by the time the food was ready, and he decided that rest was the best thing for her.

Adam ate, then paced the floor. Periodically he checked the bandage he'd placed on her shoulder. There was no sign of bleeding. He knew her arm and shoulder would be stiff and sore by morning, but there should be no infection.

Remembering how effective it was for relieving pain, Adam made up some of the tea she had given to him. He almost laughed at the sleepy face she made as she drank it. Served her right. However, the brew worked, and that was the important thing. She would be able to rest more comfortably now.

WHEN CAITLIN woke up, bright sunlight flooded the room. She was alone in the cabin and was reminded of the morning before. Adam must be outside.

Her shoulder felt much better today. She knew it was healing. She'd slept so well the night before, no doubt partly due to that potent tea.

It took her a while to pull on her clothes. Adam still hadn't returned, so she went looking for him. She discovered that the animals had all been fed but Adam was nowhere around. Puzzled, she returned to the cabin. Only then did she notice that he hadn't made coffee, but a note was propped against the coffeepot.

Please forgive me for not waking you to say goodbye. We said that yesterday, and I wasn't sure I could

leave you today if I didn't get away now. I have no choice at the moment but to go, but I'll be back. You and I have some unfinished business.

Don't forget me
Adam

Caitlin stared at the note for a long time. Of course there was no reason for him to linger. He knew she was going to be all right.

She kept reading the last line over and over. *Don't forget me.*

How could she possibly forget him? He'd said he would come back, and she believed him.

A part of her life was finished now, but she felt richer because of what she had experienced.

She had learned above love, its pain as well as its beauty. Perhaps one couldn't exist without the other.

ADAM'S ENTRY into the village was different today. After making sure no one was in sight, he slipped into the tavern by the rear entrance. When the owner was alone, he signaled to him.

"Have any strangers come into town recently? Besides me," Adam added.

The man thought for a moment. "No."

"Are you sure? Think about it."

"Well-l-l-l." The man scratched his head. "Alfredo Cortez, he's lived here a few weeks—"

"You mean, since February?"

"Oh, yes. I'd say since then...possibly. He comes in here every afternoon—sits around and visits."

"Does he ever say why he's here, like maybe because he's looking for someone?"

"Maybe... He doesn't bother anybody, you know."

Adam felt the frustration of being the outsider. Obviously this Cortez had managed to mingle with the locals.

"Thanks for your help," Adam said to the owner. He wished he had some money on him. He might have learned more.

Adam slipped out of the tavern without seeing anyone. He would find Antonio's home and explain about Caitlin's injury. He knew how much the villagers cared for her. She would be safer with them than if he stayed to look after her.

An hour later Adam was several miles from the village, headed north. He had decided against going into Monterrey. With no I.D., he might be picked up as a vagrant, with no chance to prove who he was. He decided to stay as invisible as possible and get to the border. He'd worry about getting across once he got there.

For the next several days Adam walked, hitched rides, slept in lean-tos when he could and continued his way north. By the time he made it to the border, he was almost too weak to stand. The next hurdle was to cross into the States.

Getting across the Rio Grande took three days. He spent most of that time in the border patrol office trying to convince them he was who he said he was. Eventually he was allowed to call his superiors in San Antonio who confirmed that he'd been reported missing, presumed dead.

His next call was to Dane. He was more than a little surprised when Felicia answered.

"What are you doing at the ranch?" he asked.

"Adam? Is that really you? Where are you?"

He told her, then spoke to Dane, explaining that he needed a ride home.

A couple of Agency men showed up, and he gave them as full a report as possible. He discovered that the man he had been gathering evidence on had been arrested and that a successful conclusion to the case seemed certain.

No one was sure who was behind the attempts on Adam's life. At this point it was anybody's guess.

By the time Dane and Felicia arrived, Adam's store of energy was gone. He slept all the way back to the ranch and did little more than sleep and eat for the next week.

Adam's disappearance had caused one good thing to happen: Dane and Felicia had gotten married during the time they had spent looking for him. They were expecting a baby in late fall.

So Caitlin had been right about them.

Caitlin. She was never out of his thoughts. He wouldn't be whole again until he returned to her.

In the meantime...he bought a car and drove to San Antonio. Robert McFarlane, head of the regional office, had called a private meeting with him at one of the hotels on the San Antonio River. It was a beautiful day, and they sat at one of the many outdoor tables.

Adam filled Rob in on everything that had happened. Then he had some questions of his own.

"Was that informant ever contacted?" Adam asked.

"Yes. By Zeke Taylor—not long after you disappeared."

"That makes sense. Zeke's the only other agent who knew about the contact. How did it go?"

"The man gave Zeke all the details—place of exchange, names, the whole thing—so we were able to nail Santiago and make it stick. But the informant was killed within hours after Zeke left him."

"By whom?"

"We haven't found out. We may never find out."

They sat for a while in silence, enjoying the view.

"Does Zeke know I'm back?"

"Sure. The whole Agency knows. This has been one hell of a hard case to crack."

"Do you think the informant's death ties in with the attempt on me?"

"Who can say? It would be a help if you knew what your assailant looks like."

"There is somebody who's seen him. Unfortunately, she—"

"You mean there's a woman who can finger him?"

"Well, yes, except that—"

"What are you waiting for? Bring her in. This may be the break we're looking for."

"If I can get her to come. She won't leave the mountains."

"We're not asking her to move! She'd just visit the office, look at the mug shots. When can you get her up here?"

"Good question."

*

SUMMER WEATHER came early to the mountains. Caitlin welcomed the opportunity to open her door and windows to the warm air. Her flower garden burst with riotous colors, as though to help lift her spirits.

Late one May afternoon, Caitlin entered the clearing where her cabin stood. She was weary, not only physically, since she had gotten little sleep the night before, but emotionally, because she had been sitting beside the bed of a woman old in years, but young in heart. And yet Caitlin had seen the peace that stayed with the old woman until the end.

Caitlin knew she was sad for herself, not the woman. She would miss their conversations, their sharing of healing with local herbs, and the old woman's wisdom that had been garnered over the years.

The evening rays of the sun followed her through her cabin door, lighting the shadows and illuminating the figure in front of the fireplace.

"I told you I'd be back," Adam said quietly.

Caitlin burst into tears.

He was beside her in two long strides. Scooping her into his arms, he walked

over to the bed and sat down, holding her close. "What's wrong, my love? Tell me."

His soft words only made her tears flow more freely, and she gave herself up to him, holding him tightly as though afraid he would disappear. When the tears began to diminish, she leaned back to see him more clearly.

The weeks away had obviously done him good. He looked fit—tanned and healthy.

"Oh, Adam," she finally said. "I didn't know if you would really come."

"You should know I always do what I say." He glanced down at her arms, still locked around his shoulders. "I have the feeling," he said with a slight smile, "that you're glad to see me."

She smiled and nodded, and with a hesitancy that she found endearing, he kissed her softly on her lips.

Adam seemed to be trying to memorize her, his hands roaming up and down her back, as though reassuring himself that she really did exist.

Her response to his kisses encouraged him to continue and he eased back on the bed until they were lying side by side, their mouths still clinging, enjoying the taste and touch of each other.

His hands lightly traced a line from the hollow in her neck down between her breasts to her waist, then paused.

She seemed so relaxed with him, as though for the first time she no longer fought her true feelings.

Caitlin began to pop open the snaps on his shirt so that her hands could find the smooth surface of his broad chest.

Her fingers touching his bare flesh caused him to quiver. Surely she understood what that was doing to him, but she didn't seem to care.

When he found her breasts with his fingertips, he felt her jump in response, but rather than pull back from him, she merely deepened the kiss. Adam could feel his heart racing.

Her blouse lay open, exposing her breasts, and she leaned closer to him so that they touched his bare chest. He groaned, unable to fight the feelings that were rapidly overtaking him.

"Caitlin, love—"

She looked into his eyes, seeing the love and burning desire, feeling the same emotions within her.

"I love you, Adam," she murmured.

With those words, Adam smoothed her blouse off her shoulders so that her upper body was revealed to him. Her skin glowed with a satiny sheen, her translucent coloring in deepest contrast to her fiery hair.

He traced the scar that followed the line of her shoulder, pleased to see that it had healed well. Then he leaned over and kissed it.

She was so beautiful, even more beautiful than he'd remembered.

He felt her heart fluttering when his mouth rested on the pink tip of her breast. Then his tongue lightly flicked over her breast, and he watched her body's response, gazing down at her with a possessiveness that seemed to scorch her with its warmth, while leaving her feeling shy and uncertain. Without saying a word, he slipped off her pants and shoes, and she felt the cool evening air against her bared skin.

Adam picked her up, pulled back the covers of the bed, and slipped her between them. After quickly undressing, he crawled in beside her.

Her body responded to his touch while he gave her slow, intoxicating kisses, reassuring her on the deepest level that he would never hurt her.

By the time he was poised above her, Caitlin watched him with fascinated eyes, her breathing ragged, her skin warm from his touch.

Adam slowly lowered himself to her and was not surprised to discover that no one had been there before him. He'd been aware of her innocence on some

subconscious level. He touched her lightly, so as not to frighten her.

Her eyes widened at the unexpected pressure and the sensation of him, so intimately pressed against her.

"It's all right, my love," he soothed.

"Just relax."

When he took possession of her body, Caitlin discovered that he was right. Because of his loving concern and his patience, she was ready for him. Once the initial discomfort was past, Caitlin was swept away with the sense of release.

She had never experienced anything resembling the feelings Adam aroused in her. He was so much an extension of her own being that for the first time, she realized what it meant to be one with another person.

He seemed to know how to increase the pleasurable feelings that were sweeping over her, and Caitlin seemed to know instinctively how to respond to him. She met each of his movements with one of her own, delighting in what her responsiveness did to him. Suddenly there was no more caution or patience. He caught fire, causing her to burst into flames, as well.

By the time Caitlin could comprehend what had happened, Adam was drawing slow, deep breaths, his head resting on the pillow next to hers, his body slumped to her side. She felt bemused lying in his arms—as though it was the most natural place in the world to be.

When his eyes finally opened, she was surprised to see the rueful, contrite expression in them.

"Will you forgive me, love?"

She leaned closer and kissed him lightly. "There's nothing to forgive."

"You probably won't believe I didn't plan this."

"I know."

He stroked her back. "I came back to convince you that I love you. I wanted you to know that you can trust me." He shook his head ruefully.

"Why do you want me to trust you?"

"Because I have a favor to ask of you."

"All right," she responded calmly.

"You told me you saw the man who drove the car the night I was almost killed. And that he was also the gunman who shot you."

"Yes."

He paused. "I need you to identify him for me."

She smiled. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

"I need you to go to San Antonio with me, look through the tons of photos on file and see if he's in our records." He watched her face for some reaction.

Caitlin was quiet for several minutes, knowing that her decision would have an irrevocable impact on her life.

Adam softly kissed the palm of her hand. "I know how you feel about leaving here. But I would be with you, love. These last few weeks have been hell without you."

I know only too well what it's been like without you, Caitlin silently answered. *I'm not sure I'm strong enough to allow you to leave me a second time.*

"I love you, Caitlin. I want to marry you."

Not marriage, Adam, she protested silently. *We can't take that risk.*

"Would you at least give our relationship a chance? I promise to bring you back if you want to come."

What could she say? She wanted to find the man who had tried to kill him. Until he was apprehended, Adam wouldn't be safe. Caitlin couldn't live with that thought.

"When do you want to leave?" she finally asked.

THE GENTLY rolling hills of central Texas were already baking in the sun, although the calendar insisted summer wouldn't arrive for a few more weeks.

Now that they were nearing the ranch, Caitlin could feel herself growing nervous. She refused to dwell on the fact that

Adam wanted to marry her. One step at a time.

The frustrating part about her ability was the way her emotions interfered with her reception of messages. Seldom could Caitlin visualize how things would work out in her own life. It didn't seem fair, somehow, since she felt more afflicted than blessed with the awareness in the first place.

When they pulled into the ranch yard, Caitlin looked around in dismay at the size of the place.

The two-story house had been built in another era, when labor and material were cheap. A long porch wrapped around three sides of the house. There was also a large barn, and other outbuildings. The ranch looked almost as large as the small village where she traded for supplies.

As the car stopped, the screen door of the house flew open, and a young woman came out. Caitlin immediately recognized Felicia, looking beautiful with her long blond hair and green eyes. Adam hadn't mentioned that Felicia was pregnant.

With his arm around her shoulders, Adam walked Caitlin to the house.

"Caitlin, this is my sister, Felicia." He leaned over and kissed Felicia. "Here she is, sis."

Felicia's smile reminded Caitlin of Adam, and she said so.

Felicia laughed and hugged her brother tightly for a moment. "I consider that a compliment, Caitlin." She motioned for them to go into the house ahead of her.

Caitlin peered into open doors along the hall as they went by. She saw a long living room, dining room, a den and office, then found herself in the kitchen while Adam held out a chair for her.

Felicia poured each of them a large glass of iced tea, then sat down at the table.

"I'm so glad you came, Caitlin. Adam was worried you wouldn't."

Caitlin glanced at Adam. He was leaning back against his chair, looking relaxed and happy.

"I'm glad, too," she agreed softly.

"I've put you in my old room. It's got a nice view of the place. Later on, I'd like to take you over to see the house Dane and I are building. It's about two miles from here, on the river." She glanced at Adam. "It would probably never occur to Adam to reassure you that if you decide to settle here you won't have to share your home with a bunch of relatives."

So Adam had told Felicia he wants to marry me, Caitlin realized. She cast around for a way to change the subject, and she remembered Felicia's pregnancy.

Her mind filled with images, and she knew that Dane and Felicia were delighted. They wanted a family. Impulsively she leaned toward her.

"I know Dane wants a boy, Felicia," she said with a grin, "but he's going to love his daughter very much. The boys will come later."

Adam and Felicia stared at her in stunned silence. Adam spoke first. "Uhh, Felicia, I did forget to mention one thing about Caitlin. You see, she, uh—"

"You already know I'm going to have a girl?" Felicia interrupted him.

Caitlin could feel the tension begin to build behind her eyes. She'd already managed to create a problem.

She met Felicia's startled gaze. "I seem to have the ability of knowing things like that," she explained.

Felicia clapped her hands in delight. "But that's wonderful!" She turned to Adam. "Why didn't you tell us? What an amazing gift. Have you always had it?"

Caitlin gazed at Felicia in surprise. She didn't seem to be shocked or upset. She was sincerely interested, and was waiting for Caitlin to respond.

Caitlin soon found that for every question she answered, Felicia had three more. And Caitlin felt accepted as she

was slowly drawn into the loving circle shared by Adam and Felicia.

When Dane walked into the room, he found his wife and brother-in-law chatting with a glowing young woman with bright red-gold hair cascading over her shoulders, her face animated and her eyes sparkling. He had no trouble understanding why Adam had fallen head over heels in love. The man had taste.

"It looks like the St. Clairs are at it again, both talking nonstop." Sauntering over to Felicia, Dane kissed her, then held out his hand to Adam.

Felicia said, "Oh, Dane, I want you to meet Caitlin Moran. Caitlin, this is my lord and master, Dane Rineholt."

Dane pulled a chair out and sat down. "You can't appreciate the irony in that statement yet, Caitlin, but when you get to know her better, you will."

The men grinned at each other, and Caitlin felt the love that was shared here. She had a sudden yearning to be a part of their magic circle. Was it possible?

DINNER that evening was a hilarious affair. By unspoken agreement, no one brought up the planned trip to San Antonio or its purpose. Instead Dane and Felicia told Caitlin all about Adam as a boy and a young man. He retaliated by describing the relentless war waged between Dane and Felicia before they acknowledged the love that had been between them for years.

By the time Caitlin prepared for bed that night, she knew that she could be very happy living in this house with Adam, with Felicia and Dane nearby.

Her years on the mountain had given her enough time that she no longer felt intimidated by the knowledge that seemed to flow through her at unexpected times.

Now she was going to put that knowledge to use.

ADAM'S MOOD was cheerful and teasing during the trip to San Antonio. Caitlin

found it contagious. Her weekend at the ranch had brought back memories of how she'd felt as a young girl—full of fun and high spirits.

"I hope the weekend wasn't too much for you," Adam said. "You haven't spoken since we left home."

"Oh, no. I enjoyed it very much. Dane and Felicia are very special people."

"They enjoyed you, as well."

"I was just thinking...that it might be nice to be married at the ranch."

The car swerved before it continued down the highway.

"You pick a hell of a time to accept a marriage proposal, lady. At the moment, I can't do a damn thing about it."

Caitlin looked over at him, her face glowing. "What do you want to do about it?"

"I'd much rather show you than tell you."

Admitting that she wanted to marry him seemed to lift a weight off her shoulders. Somehow she had to believe that what they felt for each other was strong enough to weather whatever life presented to them.

Adam insisted they go shopping and buy her a ring before going to the office. Once in town, he called Rob from a pay phone. Afterward, he laughed and caught her in his arms.

"Rob said a few hours wasn't going to make that much difference and if I'd managed to talk you into an engagement, I'd better get the evidence on your finger."

By the time they reached the Agency office, Caitlin felt her thoughts almost whirling. Glancing down at the large diamond solitaire, Caitlin could scarcely believe how quickly Adam had gotten organized once she'd accepted his proposal.

The man striding down the hall beside her was a definite force to be reckoned with. After the introductions, Rob McFarlane motioned for them to be seated. "I'm very pleased that you agreed

to help us out, Miss Moran. Has Adam explained what was happening at the time of his disappearance?"

"No. I never asked."

"He had made friends with Felipe Santiago under the guise of helping to distribute drugs on this side of the river. Santiago was the middleman between the South Americans and the distribution up here. After a few successful operations, Santiago had learned to trust Adam."

She looked at the men in dismay. "You mean you were actually distributing the drugs?"

"We brought them in and impounded them. But Santiago wasn't aware of that. Adam had asked to meet his contact from South America, and Santiago arranged it. That meeting was aborted by a message Adam received just before he left his hotel, although Santiago never knew that."

Rob continued, "Adam got a call telling him the meeting was a trap, that Santiago was trying to bypass him. The caller said he could give him the evidence he needed without risk if Adam would meet him in the mountains."

"Only he never kept his appointment."

"Correct. What we want to know is who knew about the appointment in the mountains. Was it Santiago, or is someone else involved? The bottom line is—does someone know that Adam is an agent, or were they just trying to get rid of competition? I can't send him back over there until I know for certain. That's where you come in."

"If I can identify the man for you, you'll know why he was trying to kill Adam?"

"That's what we're counting on, yes."

"And if I can't?"

"We're in no worse shape than we were before."

"I see. I appreciate your explaining all of this to me."

"If you were merely a witness, I wouldn't have. But as Adam's future

wife I wanted you to understand the situation. He didn't have the clearance to give you the details. I do."

Caitlin followed Adam to another office where two desks were pushed together.

"Zeke and I share this office whenever we're in town, which isn't very often," Adam explained. "Have a seat, and I'll bring in the albums."

She sat down and looked around. "Where's Zeke now?"

"Mexico, as far as I know. He rarely comes out anymore. He's been with the Agency for years and has developed a damned good cover down there."

He leaned over and kissed her. "I'll be right back."

Hours later Caitlin finally had to call a halt to the progression of photographs. "I'm sorry, Adam. This is getting to be more than I can handle."

Adam took one look at her face and realized he'd been pushing her. She was very pale. "Damn. I wasn't thinking. I'm afraid I get carried away with something like this. You must be exhausted."

"I am, but it's because these people carry such a charge on them." She pointed to one. "He's in prison now and filled with hate." She indicated another. "He's extremely dangerous. Kills for the excitement of it." About a third, she said, "I think he's dead."

Adam stared at her in surprise. "I guess I hadn't given it a thought—how all of this would affect you." He stood up and held out his hand. "Come on. I'll buy you dinner and ply you with wine. That's bound to help you relax. Then back to the hotel."

He was as good as his word. By the time they walked into the hotel room, Caitlin felt much more relaxed and more than a little sleepy.

She kicked off her shoes and unbuttoned her blouse while Adam adjusted the drapes. When he turned around, she wore only her panties and a bra. She

walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"I'll stop by in the morning so we can have breakfast together," he said.

Caitlin glanced around in surprise. "You aren't staying with me tonight?"

"I know you're tired and—"

"That doesn't matter. I'd like to know you're nearby."

He wondered if she had any idea how enticing she looked. "You don't understand, Caitlin. I love you too much to spend the night without making love to you, especially now."

She calmly unfastened her bra and stepped out of her panties. "No one's said 'no,' Adam." With a lingering glance over her shoulder, she stepped into the shower.

Caitlin looked around in surprise soon after, when the shower door slid open. Adam stepped in, wearing only a grin.

"Are you enjoying the convenience of a shower after all those years without one?" he asked as he took the soapy washcloth away from her. He began to lightly stroke her arms, her shoulders and, with ever widening circles, her breasts.

Caitlin felt a shiver race through her at his touch. He had such a strong effect on her.

"Am I disturbing you in some way?"

She looked up at him. "What do you think?"

His hands went around her, pulling her closer until her soap-slickened body pressed against him. He meticulously soaped her back from shoulder to hip, but his touch felt more like a caress.

When Adam finally leaned down and kissed her, her knees gave way, and she would have fallen if he hadn't held her even tighter. She twined her arms around his neck and returned his kiss, her uninhibited response making it clear she felt committed to him, and their future. He hadn't thought it possible to love her more than he did, but now his heart

threatened to explode with the joy that flooded over him.

She insisted on taking her turn at bathing him and took such an excruciatingly long and loving time to soap his body that he thought he'd lose his mind.

When he'd had all he could take, Adam turned her toward the water so she could rinse off, then gently pushed her out of the shower. After quickly rinsing off, he followed.

After a couple of careless wipes with a towel, he picked her up and strode into the other room. "I've had all the teasing I intend to take from you, young lady," he said, dropping her on the bed.

"Who says I was teasing, Mr. St. Clair?"

His breath caught in his throat when he took in the picture she made, and with a feeling bordering on reverence, he knelt and began to kiss her—starting with her neck, then her breasts, and slowly downward, pausing to nip her with his teeth and stroke her with his tongue.

She felt as though her body had caught fire. "Oh, Adam—"

"Do you love me?" he asked between kisses.

"Oh, yes."

"Do you want me?"

"Desperately."

There was nothing gentle about their lovemaking this time. It was an expression of powerful love mingled with need. Neither one of them could get enough of the other during the ensuing hours. Their murmured whispers spoke of their joy with each other, their hope for the future, their unquenchable love.

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SOMETHING WOKE HER from a sound sleep, and Caitlin sat up in bed, alarmed. She felt a niggling in the back of her mind—a warning about something.

Getting out of bed carefully, so as not to awaken Adam, she slipped on her robe, then got a glass of water. Back in

the bedroom, she went over to the window and quietly opened the curtains.

The skyline of San Antonio was in front of her and she gazed out at the night, feeling a definite unease. Eventually she sat down in the large chair by the window and leaned her head back.

While she sat there, pictures began to form. She saw the man whose picture she had tried to find today and now she understood why she hadn't seen him.

Other people came in and out. Scenes were enacted, and slowly she began to piece the sequence of events together. It was a story of deceit and betrayal, of greed and malice. Pain began to build up within her. Pain for Adam...and for herself.

Now she knew. And in order to protect Adam, she must tell him. Would he accept the truth? Was there any way she could prove to him that it *was* the truth?

CAITLIN WOKE to the smell of coffee, and opening her eyes, found Adam holding a cup and sitting on the bed.

"I was wondering if you intended to sleep all morning. I didn't mean to wear you out last night." His grin was full of mischief. Adam was so full of life, so loyal to those he loved and trusted. It was that loyalty she had to disturb this morning.

Trying to gain some time, she asked, "What time is it?"

"After ten. Breakfast is here. I went ahead and ordered."

"Oh." She glanced over at the table, all set up. "I'll be ready in a few minutes." She would tell him...right after breakfast.

Caitlin dressed and sat down across from Adam whose face shone as with a thousand candles. Conversation was limited while both of them ate. Caitlin didn't realize how expressive her own face was until Adam finally said, "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something's bothering you. Damn it, don't leave me out of your thoughts. Share them with me."

"I know who is trying to kill you."

For a moment Adam just stared at her. "You're in considerable danger," she added.

He tried to lighten the situation by joking. "If I didn't get the message the first time, the gunman convinced me of that. So who is he?"

"The gunman isn't important. He's a hired killer. You don't have him booked because he's never been to the States."

"Do you know who hired him?"

This was the hard part. "A friend of yours."

He laughed harshly. "Right. A friend."

"I mean it, Adam. He's a man very close to you, and he's betrayed you, not once, but many times."

His stomach clenched as he stared at her. "Who?"

She was quiet for a few minutes, her eyes closed. When she began to speak, it was in a clear, detached voice. "He's tall, but not quite as tall as you. American but with dark hair and eyes. He can pass as a Latin. He wears a closely trimmed beard...quite a ladies' man." She opened her eyes and looked at him. "You work together."

Adam stared at her in disbelief. That description fit only one man, the one that it couldn't possibly be. He was stunned. He'd trusted Caitlin's abilities, but this was so absurd that he had to discount everything.

Fighting to keep his voice neutral, he said, "Do you by any chance know his name?"

She was quiet for a moment. "I'm not sure. I think it starts with a T. Maybe Tyler."

Damn, she was good. He'd give her that. "Zeke Taylor?"

"Taylor. Yes. That fits."

"Well, love, I'm afraid your psychic powers led you astray on this one, but that's all right."

"You don't believe me."

"Oh, I'm sure you believe what you're saying is the truth. You're just wrong, that's all."

"Am I?"

She sounded so aloof, not like the warm woman he'd held so close to him the night before.

Adam stood up and walked across the room, then turned around and faced her.

"There's no way you could know this, but Zeke and I have been working on this case for as long as I've been with the Agency. My God! He trained me. I never made a move down there that he didn't know about."

"Yes, that fits."

Her cool, unemotional voice infuriated him. All right, he decided. He'd play along with her. "Caitlin, why would Zeke Taylor want me killed?"

"Because you found out too much about what was going on down there. You got too close to him."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You remember the man you were to meet that night? Taylor killed him."

"That's a lie!" He strode over to her. "Zeke Taylor met the man after I disappeared and got the information that led to Santiago's arrest. Zeke solved the case!"

Caitlin stood and walked over to the window. Lifting her chin slightly, she turned and faced Adam. "No. Taylor already knew about Santiago, Adam. He sacrificed Santiago. Taylor had to decide who was expendable." She walked back to the table and stood there. "The man died because he intended to tell you about Taylor's involvement in the operation." Restless, she turned and faced him again. "Taylor has kept the smugglers informed of the Agency's movements for years. Periodically he throws someone to the Agency to keep them happy."

Adam watched her wander back to the window. She explained as she paced. "Santiago was actually a bored businessman who enjoyed the excitement. Zeke used him to front his own involvement. Zeke's the one who vouched for you to Santiago. Zeke needed you where he could keep an eye on you.

"Zeke doesn't know how the man you were supposed to meet found out about him," she explained, "but when you called him that night about that anonymous phone call, he knew he had to do something fast." Adam's face remained without expression. "He got to the man first but lost his temper and killed him before he found out how he got the information."

Once again, she looked out the window. She had no choice but to tell it all.

Turning to Adam, Caitlin said, "That's when Zeke realized he would have to eliminate you before you found another source that would lead you to him." She walked over to him. "Zeke Taylor has a flourishing business in Mexico, one that he doesn't intend to jeopardize over a little thing like friendship." Wishing she could soften it, she continued, "He likes you, Adam, but you've become too much of a threat to him. As long as you're alive, he won't feel safe." In a musing tone she added, "He still can't figure out how you survived. He saw a picture taken of you at the scene of the crash and thought you were dead. Later, when he discovered your body was gone, he sent his gunman up in the mountains to look for you."

Adam felt almost numb with shock. His world seemed to have broken into small, unrecognizable pieces. Zeke Taylor? Impossible. Zeke had taught him everything he knew. Took him under his wing when he first started. He and Zeke had become good friends. Zeke wanted him dead?

"I'm sorry, Adam."

He could feel the pain and frustration pulsing at him. "Why didn't you tell me

this at the very beginning, when I regained consciousness? If you're so damned psychic, why did you wait until now?"

Caitlin stood up. "I didn't pick up on Zeke Taylor before because I wasn't trying to solve anything, Adam. I had no desire to find out who was trying to kill you or why. I was just trying to keep you from dying."

She walked over to the window and stood there looking out. With her back to him, she said, "You understand now, don't you? Why I can't live around people? Why I can't have close friends or close ties of any kind?"

When he didn't respond, she continued, her voice husky. "I know what you're feeling right now, you see. You're feeling betrayed and angry and hurt. And you resent the fact that I knew, as though you have no privacy at all, no place to retreat until you can come to terms with what you're feeling.

"This is why I was so uncertain about marrying you. No one should have to live with someone like me."

Adam felt overwhelmed with emotions. He had to get away. Moving toward the door, he said, "Look, we're both upset right now. I need some time to think. I'm sure you do, too. Why don't you do some sight-seeing? I'll be back later and we can talk then."

She turned. "I'll be fine, Adam. Go ahead and do what you need to do."

He nodded and walked out the door.

Caitlin sank down into the chair and stared out the window. Then she went ahead and packed the few things she had taken out of her suitcase the night before.

Glancing down at her ring, she carefully slipped it off her finger, placed it in a hotel envelope, then in Adam's bag. He'd see it when he packed.

Caitlin left the room. She would go to the airport. Get a plane to Monterrey. Hire a car to take her to the village, hike back to her cabin.

Rebuild her old life.

ADAM WALKED for several hours. He knew he'd overreacted. Caitlin hadn't been to blame. Even though he didn't understand her perceptions, he did know that she was sincere and had only been trying to help.

That was the key, he was sure. Because she wanted to help so much, she had forced some sort of "pick up" that she had misread . . . something.

He glanced at his watch. Three o'clock. Rob expected them in before now, but Caitlin wouldn't be in the mood to look at any more photos. Neither was he.

When he arrived, Rob's secretary smiled. "You're supposed to go on in whenever you show up."

Adam tapped at the door, opening it at the same time.

The man seated across from Rob wore a Mexican shirt, faded jeans and Mexican sandals. His wide smile flashed white in contrast to his close-trimmed beard. He stood up, threw his arms around Adam, and hugged him. "Well, *mi amigo*, Rob tells me congratulations are in order. I can't believe it, you old reprobate."

"Hello, Zeke, what brings you back to the States?" Adam asked in a neutral tone that clearly surprised the others.

"Don't tell me you've already had your first quarrel," Rob asked.

"Something like that," Adam said, sitting down. "So what's up?"

Rob shrugged. "I was just filling Zeke in on things at this end."

"Yeah. I'd heard you managed to get yourself out of Mexico. That was a miracle, *amigo*. Why didn't you let me know you survived?"

"I wasn't in any shape to contact anyone."

"That's quite a little memento you got." Zeke indicated the scar on Adam's forehead.

Adam rubbed the scar. "I've almost forgotten about it. It doesn't bother me much anymore."

"You were damned lucky. Rob tells me the woman who nursed you back to health is your fiancée?"

"That's right."

"And she also saw the man who tried to kill you."

Adam was finding himself more and more reluctant to continue the conversation. He didn't believe what Caitlin had told him, but his emotions had just gone through a wringer.

"Yes, but she couldn't identify him from any of our mug shots."

"That's too bad. Is she in our office now? Maybe I'll go on back and introduce myself." Zeke stood up.

"No, I didn't bring her today. She was tired."

"Where are you two staying?"

"At the Hilton."

"Good choice." He turned to Rob. "Well, guess I'll check my desk. I'll talk to you guys later." He left the room.

Adam looked over at Rob. "Why did Zeke say he was up here? I didn't catch that."

"Oh, said he was checking out some leads. He was very interested in everything that had happened to you. Says you're one of his most valuable men. He was quite upset when he thought we'd lost you."

Damn Caitlin for planting doubts in Adam's mind.

"How well do you know Zeke, Rob?"

"Hell, I don't know. As well as I know you. Zeke was here when I transferred in from Washington about eight years ago. Why?"

"I just wondered. He's been with the Agency a long time, hasn't he?"

"Fifteen years."

"And he's spent all his time in Mexico?"

"That's right. Is there some point to all of this?"

"Isn't it unusual that he hasn't been promoted?"

"Does any other airline fly there?"

"Not from this airport."

Now what was she to do?

She wished she knew.

ADAM FELT a distinct sinking sensation in his stomach when he returned to the room and saw that Caitlin's suitcase was gone.

Adam called the front desk, knowing there was only a slim chance that someone had seen her leave.

The desk clerk told him, "I came on at three today, sir. Her key was already here."

Great. She left before three. There was only one place Caitlin would go. He called the airport.

"What airlines fly to Monterrey?"

When he was given the name of the airline, he called their number, but there was no answer. He glanced at his watch. It was almost seven.

He paced the floor, trying to decide what to do. Did he go out and walk the streets, go looking for her? And if so, where?

Adam decided to call Rob at home.

"Caitlin's gone," he told him.

"That must have been one hell of a fight you had," Rob said. "Where do you think she's gone?"

"Back to Mexico."

"Well, that's just great, isn't it? If what we think is true, she's going to be a sitting duck down there."

"Maybe, except no one knows where she lives."

"So you think she's safe there."

"I don't know what to think at this point. All I know is I have royally messed up this relationship."

"Take it easy. If what you suspect is true, your deductions may have cracked this drug ring wide open."

"They weren't my deductions, Rob. That's the point."

"What are you talking about?"

"The fight I had with Caitlin. She's psychic, clairvoyant... whatever. She

picked up on the man, gave him a suggestion, and I blew up at her. I don't believe her."

Stunned silence greeted him. Then he asked, "If you didn't believe her at first, what made you change your mind?"

"I'm not sure. I probably wouldn't have if he hadn't been in the office. Today I watched him as I would any other suspect, and I picked up on things."

"Such as?"

"Mannerisms, body language, eye contact. That warm, friendly greeting I got looked great, but his eyes were cold, Rob. He was studying me, trying to figure out what I knew. I could almost feel it."

"Maybe you're psychic, too." Rob chuckled.

"You know as well as I do that our intuitive abilities get overworked in this business. And mine kicked into overdrive during that session, Rob. Now I've just got to find Caitlin and convince her that although I'm a complete clod I love her to distraction."

"I just wish we had something concrete to hang on him," Rob pointed out. "I made some phone calls to Mexico City. At the moment we can't trust any of our usual pipelines. I explained the urgency. We should be hearing something soon."

"Thanks, Rob."

"Well, I won't pretend that I don't hope you're wrong."

"I feel the same way."

"Call me when you hear something from Caitlin."

"If... that's the operative word."

Sighing, Adam dropped onto the chair by the window and gazed out at the night.

CAITLIN HAD LOST track of time. She felt as though she'd spent days at the airport, but when she caught a taxi downtown, she realized she'd been there for only a few hours.

"He's turned down numerous promotions. Says he likes fieldwork. What the hell is this all about?"

Adam sighed. "Rob, only two people knew I had a meeting that night—Santiago and Zeke. I didn't make the meeting with Santiago's contact, and Zeke was the only other person who knew I would be going out into the mountains."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not sure. All I know is that I'd swear I wasn't followed. Whoever came up behind me was waiting. They knew where I would be going."

The two men sat across from each other. Each knew what the other was thinking. Their salaries were good but couldn't compare with the kind of money generated by drug dealing.

If Zeke Taylor had succumbed, he wouldn't be the first agent to be lured away. Or the last.

But if he were straight, how could Adam ever face him again? He didn't know what to do.

"I'm not telling you you're wrong, Adam," Rob said slowly. "But Zeke's the one who pulled this one out of the fire for us. He nailed Santiago."

"Yeah, I know. But just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that Zeke is involved. If that's the case, he'd already have had that information."

"Suppose the information I was to get was something else... something about Zeke. But the informant turned up dead, right after Zeke saw him."

"You're saying Zeke killed him?"

"I don't know. I'm just thinking out loud."

The men sat there in silence for a time.

"I could do some investigating," Rob finally said. "Check on his bank accounts, that sort of thing. He couldn't hide that much extra income, although with him living in Mexico, we haven't kept tabs like we could if he were here."

"I don't know what to say, Rob. I just have this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. And I can't help but think

about Caitlin's predicament if Zeke had anything to do with what happened to me."

"What do you mean?"

"She can identify the driver. And we have filled Zeke in on everything. If we can find the driver, and he can point the finger at Zeke— Look, let's just remember that no one else knew where I was going. Is that enough to start watching what Zeke is up to? Do we really know what leads he's following up here? Is it possible I'm one? And now Caitlin?"

Rob pushed the intercom button. "Would you tell Zeke I'd like to see him?" Then, "Oh?" he said. "When did he leave?" He frowned at Adam. "I see. No, no problem." He hung up.

"He's gone?"

"Yeah, said he probably wouldn't be back today."

"Which could be perfectly in line with his job."

"Yeah."

They both sat there for a few moments.

"Where's Caitlin?" Rob finally asked.

"I'm not sure. We had words earlier, and like an idiot I stormed out."

Rob stood up. "Why don't you get back to the hotel and make up? I'd feel a hell of a lot better if you didn't let Caitlin out of your sight for a few days, at least until I've had some things checked out."

By the time she heard the announcement that her flight was canceled, Caitlin felt numb, which she considered a blessing. All she wanted to do was get home.

She couldn't get Adam out of her mind. She still felt his pain and confusion, but also his guilt at his behavior toward her. However, she wasn't ready to face him again.

"When is your next flight to Monterrey?" she asked the harried airline official behind the counter.

"Tomorrow afternoon at 3:30."

Adam's love seemed to surge around her in heavy waves as though he were sending messages to her. By the time she got into the taxi, Caitlin knew that she had to return to the hotel and face him. Perhaps that plane hadn't taken off for a reason. She'd been given another chance.

There were a great many cars and taxis in front of the Hilton, and she had her driver let her out nearby. But as she started down the street toward the main entrance, a sense of unease settled over her, and she paused. Something was wrong.

Without analyzing her feeling, Caitlin knew that she must bypass the lobby area. She went into a boutique with entrances both on the street and inside the hotel. From there, she quietly went toward the lobby.

What was wrong?

The lobby was filled with people, probably conventioners. She felt no threat from any of them.

Then her mind's eye clearly focused on a man across the lobby, talking to a bellhop—a man with dark hair and eyes and a closely-trimmed beard.

Zeke Taylor.

She knew without a doubt that he was looking for her. Hastily stepping back, she took the stairway to the next floor, then the elevator to the floor where she and Adam had spent the night.

Caitlin hadn't stopped for her key, and so could only pray that Adam was in the room. Pausing, she tapped lightly on the door and waited, forcing herself not to hold her breath.

Adam heard the soft tap and sprang from his chair. Few people knew he was there. Zeke was one of them. He had his pistol in his hand when he asked quietly, "Who is it?"

"Caitlin."

Adam threw open the door, grabbed her and hauled her into his arms. Kicking the door closed, he held her tightly against him.

"Oh, God, Caitlin. I've been so worried. Where the hell have you been? I've been out of my mind!"

Not giving her a chance to answer him, he began to kiss her, then he remembered that he still held his pistol and he paused, looking down at her.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you, lady?" he asked.

"I love you, too, Adam. And I don't blame you for your doubts. I'm just so afraid at the moment."

He'd laid the gun down by the bed and gathered her in his arms. "Don't be. Everything's going to work out all right."

"Adam?"

"Hmm?"

"I know how you feel about Zeke and all. I just think you should know he's in San Antonio."

"Yes, I know. I saw him— How did you know?"

"He's downstairs in the lobby."

He immediately dropped his arms and walked away.

"I know he's your friend, but I'm afraid of him."

"Yeah, well, I can understand that."

"Do you think he's coming up here?"

"There's a strong possibility. I told him where we were staying, and he said he'd like to meet you."

She felt a shiver run over her spine.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of letting him see you."

There was a knock at the door, and Adam put a finger to his lips, then called, "Who is it?"

"Zeke."

Adam picked up Caitlin's bag and placed it in the bathroom. He motioned for her to get into the shower, then went and opened the door.

"Well, hello, Zeke. I didn't expect you. Come on in."

Zeke wore the same clothes he'd had on earlier. He walked in, glanced around, then sat down.

"Where's your fiancée?"

"Good question. I guess I made her madder than I thought this morning. When I came back, she was gone."

Zeke laughed. "Some ladies' man you are, St. Clair. Thought I'd trained you better than that."

Adam shrugged and sat down. "So what are you up to?"

"Oh, nothing much. Thought I'd take you guys out for a drink, meet your lady love."

"Guess you're out of luck, then."

"Where do you suppose she went?"

"Who knows? Probably back to the mountains."

"You never did tell me where you were for all that time. Those mountains are pretty vast."

"To be honest, I couldn't tell you, myself."

Zeke looked around the room again. "So. How about you and me going for that drink?"

"I don't think I'm up to it tonight. I still get tired easily, and I'm feeling pretty beat."

Zeke stood up. "Sure. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"When are you going back to Mexico?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. What about you?"

"I'm thinking about asking for a leave of absence. There's work to be done around the ranch."

"You thinking about giving up your Agency work?"

"The thought has crossed my mind. I don't know how you've managed to stay with it so long."

"Oh, it gets in your blood after a while. You get so you can't live without the excitement."

"Better you than me." Adam walked him to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Zeke gave a casual wave and walked out. Adam put the night latch on and listened at the door until he heard the clang of the elevator doors closing. He

turned to find Caitlin standing in the bathroom doorway.

"You know about him, don't you?" she said softly.

His eyes met hers. "I do now." Adam walked over to her and began to unbutton her blouse.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for bed."

"Adam, we need to talk."

"I know. I find I can talk better horizontal."

"I'm sorry for running out that way—"

"I'm sorry for being a complete fool when you were trying to save both of us," he replied, peeling away her blouse.

"Adam—"

He unfastened her skirt and let it fall to the floor, then pushed her remaining undergarments down. Picking her up, he put her on the bed.

"Adam, I know how you must feel—"

"Good," he muttered, stripping out of his clothes, "then I don't have to explain my intentions."

"No, I mean about Zeke and... Oh, Adam."

His mouth had found her breast, and he tenderly touched his tongue to the peak, his hand gently squeezing the other one.

"I love you, Caitlin," he murmured.

"Oh, Adam, I love you, too."

"Don't give up on me yet, love. Give me some time to get used to all of your talents and abilities, okay?" His mouth had touched her intimately, and she could no longer think. She could only feel.

By the time he raised himself above her, Caitlin felt reduced to a mass of sensations, knowing that Adam was the only man in all the world who could fulfill her. His possession of her was more than physical. It was as though their very spirits were entwined, and they became lost in the sharing.

Whatever happened, they would face it together. Each had something to teach the other—about life, about love.

They had a whole lifetime in which to learn.

ADAM AND Caitlin fell asleep in each other's arms. They clung to each other, as though aware of how close they had come to losing what they had.

The phone rang several times before Adam answered.

"Good news," Rob McFarlane said cryptically.

Adam blinked and turned on the bedside light.

"My inquiry detonated a powder keg down south. Seems they've been working on something similar, but through different sources. The evidence has been mounting up, but they couldn't put a name or face to it. Until tonight. We've got him, Adam. Got him cold."

"Why can't I feel better about that?"

"He almost succeeded in killing you, Adam."

Adam glanced at Caitlin lying next to him, asleep. Her hand rested under her cheek, and for the first time he realized she wasn't wearing his ring.

"When are you going to make the arrest?"

"In the morning. There's some paperwork to get done. And I've got to make sure he can't get out on bail. If he does, and he were to get across the border, he'd be gone."

"Are you going to need me for anything?"

"No. You deserve some time off."

"Thanks. I need it."

"I expect a wedding invitation, you know."

"You'll get one," he replied. *If there's a wedding.*

Eventually Adam dozed, sleeping fitfully, but he was so aware of Caitlin that he knew the moment she woke up the next morning.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Good morning," he said, trying to read her expression.

She smiled. "Did I hear the phone ring last night, or was I dreaming?"

"It rang. Rob called to say they had the evidence to pick up Zeke."

"Oh." She propped herself up. "I know how badly you must feel."

There were degrees of feeling badly; he thought wryly. Losing a friend was tough. Losing your love was a hell of a lot tougher.

"Looks like the case is wrapped up," he offered. "So there's no reason to stay here."

She sat up and stretched. "Did you mean what you said to Zeke last night? About getting out of the business?"

"I've given it some thought. Why?"

"I just wondered."

"So what do you want to do now?" Why did his heart rate seem to pick up just because he'd finally asked?

"Go back to the cabin, I suppose."

Well, he had his answer. Funny that he'd thought all of his fears were behind him. What could he say to that? He couldn't hold her captive on the ranch. Having previously agreed to marry him didn't lock her into anything. That's what engagements were for. A testing. And he had flunked the test.

"Do you want me to drive you back?" He was proud of his voice. He sounded carefully neutral.

Caitlin paused from sliding out of bed and looked at him, really looked at him. Why did he ask such a question?

"Don't you want to take me back?"

His eyes looked wintry. "Shall I be polite or honest?"

"Okay, so you don't want to make another trip down there. But how do you suggest I get everything moved from down there to the ranch?"

He sat up straight. "The ranch? You're moving to the ranch?"

Caitlin looked at him, worried about his mental condition. Maybe this latest

news had been too much for him. She walked around to his side of the bed and sat down. Taking his hand, she lovingly stroked it.

"Adam. Most new marriages are begun under a considerable strain. I'm sure ours won't be an exception. But we really need to be together to make it work."

He slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her mouth over to his. "Is that your way of trying to tell me that you'll marry me, after all?"

She blinked. "What do you mean, after all?"

His mouth clamped tightly to hers in a hard, possessive kiss that left no doubt in her mind that he was perturbed about something. However, it also made it quite clear that he wanted her very badly.

"Where is your ring?" he finally said.

"My ring? Oh! I forgot." Scrambling off the bed, Caitlin hurried over to Adam's suitcase and delved into it. She took the ring from the envelope, slipped it on her finger and returned to the bed. "There." She smiled at him.

"Why did you take it off?"

"You know why. I thought our engagement proved how unsuited we were and that it proved how right I'd been all along not to get involved with anyone."

"And now?"

"Now I know that you'll hate it when I know what you're thinking, but the only thing that really matters is that we love each other. That's what counts."

He pulled her down on top of him. "You are a very wise lady, Caitlin Moran. Now, would you please check your crystal ball and see if there's any reason we have to hurry down to Mexico today?"

"I can't think of any. Can you?"

"No, I can't. I was thinking maybe we'd spend some time today planning our honeymoon."

"You mean this isn't it?"

He pulled her down beside him, and began to untie her robe. "No, ma'am. This was just a preview."

Caitlin ran her hands along his back and smiled. "Then I can hardly wait for the main event."

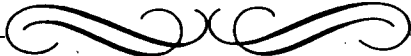




**DIANA
PALMER**
**Room Full
of Roses**

»

Only one thing stood in the way of Wynn Ascol's marriage—her legal guardian, McCabe Foxe. The tough war correspondent invaded her life again—and laid siege to her heart.



It was the most wonderful kind of spring day—warm after the recent rain, with butterflies gliding around a puddle beside the porch of the weathered old country store in southern Creek County. Wynn Ascot went up the cracked concrete steps onto the dusty porch and through the screen door. She shook back her long black hair as she walked into the store.

Mrs. Baker looked up.

"Loafing, huh?" the white-haired woman teased.

Wynn grinned.

The older woman pursed her lips. "You do a story about my boy Henry and I'll keep your guilty secret. He caught a fifteen-pound bass this morning over at James Lewis's pond," Mrs. Baker said proudly.

"You tell him to bring it by my office about two o'clock today and I'll get a picture of it for the paper," Wynn agreed. "Now, how about a soda? I'm parched!"

With a sigh, Wynn took her pop and sank down beside the wooden fruit bin into a comfortably swaybacked cane-bottom straight chair.

Mrs. Baker leaned on the counter. "How's Katy Maude?" she asked.

"Aunt Katy Maude is up in the north Georgia mountains visiting her sister Cattie." The young woman grinned. "The two of them have been threatening to ride an inner tube down the Chattahoochee this summer."

Mrs. Baker burst out laughing. "I'll just bet Katy would do it on a dare! Say, when are you and Andy getting married? Will McCabe come back to give you away?" Mrs. Baker asked.

Hearing his name was enough to cause volcanic sensations in Wynn. McCabe Foxe held the administrative keys to her father's legacy, doling out her allowance and taking care of her investments until she was either twenty-five or married. At her next birthday, she'd be twenty-four. But before then, she'd be married to Andy, and McCabe would fade away into the past where he belonged. Thank God, she added silently.

"I don't think so," she replied finally, smiling at Mrs. Baker. "He's down in Central America right now, covering that last skirmish for the wire services. And getting fodder for his next adventure novel, no doubt," she added with a trace of bitterness.

"Isn't that something?" The elderly woman sighed, her eyes suddenly dreamy. "Imagine, a famous author who lived just a couple of houses away from you for all those years. Right up until he went into wire-service reporting with your father."

Thinking about that made Wynn uncomfortable. She didn't like the memories of those days.

"Good thing your father let McCabe handle the money," Mrs. Sanders remarked. "Your mother left quite an estate, and you were still in your teens when your dad died."

Wynn finished her soft drink and placed the empty bottle on the counter. "Well, I'd better get back to the salt mines, I reckon. It's press day and if I know Edward, he'll be calling all over the county any minute to find out where I'm hiding. See you later." She made a run for the door, her skirt flying.

Wynn started the small car and was roaring away toward Redvale. Thinking about McCabe had upset her. Wynn had stopped watching the newscasts because she couldn't bear to see what was happening in Central America. She couldn't bear the thought that McCabe might be badly hurt.

It shouldn't have mattered, of course. They had never gotten along. She leaned back hard against the seat, her foot easing down on the accelerator. Arrogant, hardheaded man—she still couldn't believe that her father had legally had McCabe appointed executor of his will and Wynn's estate. It seemed ridiculous somehow, when Katy Maude would have been the logical person to put in charge, since she'd had responsibility for Wynn since her childhood, while Jesse Ascot was off covering news.

When she got back to the Redvale *Courier's* office, Edward Keene looked up, aiming a glare at Wynn.

"Do you know what day it is? Do you realize that I'm making this paper up alone and trying to help Judy proof copy and set ads..."

"I got photos," she said, holding up the camera with a grin. "A house fire and that new bypass bridge they just finished in Union City. That gives you pix for the front page."

He nodded. "Okay, with what I've already got, that'll fill 'er up."

"I'll take it back to Jess in the dark-room," she said, and started into the outer office.

"Uh, after you do that, come into my office for a minute, will you?" Edward hesitated.

Wynn glanced at him, puzzled. He looked strange for an instant. She shrugged and rushed to the back with the film. It was press day, she told herself. Everybody looked strange then.

She handed the film to Jess with a grin at the harassed look that immediately appeared on his thin, aging face. "Here

I am with three rush jobs, one to get out by two o'clock, I haven't made the first negative..." He kept right on muttering, and she dashed back into the newspaper office and closed the door.

Edward was sitting behind the heavily loaded desk. He pulled off his glasses and whipped out a spotless white handkerchief to clean them with.

"Well, sit down," he said impatiently.

"What is it?" she asked, getting scared. He looked... really strange.

He cleared his throat. "Why don't you keep up on what's happening in Central America? Then you'd know and I wouldn't have to stumble all over myself."

Her blood actually ran cold. She gripped the arms of the chair. "McCabe," she gasped.

"He's alive," he said. He tossed an issue of the Atlanta morning daily over to her.

She looked away from the banner headline to the accompanying story. "WAR CORRESPONDENT INJURED." There was a small, very dark photo of McCabe and she strained her eyes to see if he'd changed much over the long years, but she couldn't even make out his features. She read the copy. McCabe had been hurt while covering a story, and there was some speculation as to whether the incident was connected to the deaths of two French correspondents that had been reported earlier that week. According to the story, McCabe had been roughed up and had a torn ligament in one leg and a trace of concussion, but he was alive.

"It doesn't say where he is now," she murmured.

"Uh, I was afraid you'd wonder about that. Be kind of hard to miss him, of course," he mumbled, "when you walk in your front door. Big man..."

"He's at my house?" she burst out. "What's he doing at my house!"

"Recuperating," he assured her. Edward looked at her over his glasses. "After all, he's your guardian."

"Guardian! My tormentor, my inquisitor, my worst enemy, and you've put him under my own roof!" she wailed.

"He's hurt," Edward reminded her. "Poor wounded soldier, and you'd turn him out in the cold!"

Her full lips pouted at him. "You don't know McCabe like I do," she argued.

"He wants to meet your fiancé," he continued. "He's concerned about your future."

"He wants to dictate it, that's why," she growled, standing. "Well, he won't get away with it. He's not going to wrap me around his thumb!"

"Where are you going?" he called.

"Off to war," she called back. "I'm taking my lunch hour late," she told him. "I'll be back in an hour."

Edward threw up his hands. "We're already an hour behind schedule and she'll only be gone an hour."

But Wynn wasn't listening. She was running for her car, with sparks flying from her green eyes. If McCabe thought he'd been through a war, he hadn't seen anything yet!

WYNN COULD sense McCabe even as she opened the unlocked door of the white frame cottage. She stormed in, her hair flying as she turned to go into the living room. She stopped short just inside the doorway and caught her breath.

All the years rolled away. McCabe looked just as Wynn remembered him, big and bronzed and blond—larger than life. His craggy face looked battle-worn, and the light eyes that were neither gray nor blue but a mixture of the two narrowed as they roamed boldly over her slender body.

She stared helplessly, trying to reconcile her memories with the man before her.

"You're older," she said in a tone that was unconsciously soft.

He nodded. "So are you, honey."

Casual endearments were as much a part of him as his square-tipped fingers, but the word caused an odd sensation in Wynn. She didn't understand why, and she didn't like it.

"Just months away from my inheritance," she reminded him with a smile. "When Andy and I marry, I'm a free woman."

"Andrew Slone," he muttered, leaning back in the chair with a sigh. "How in hell did you get landed with him?"

She gasped. "I love him!"

He ground out a cigarette in the ashtray on the table beside his chair. "You'd stagnate married to a man with his hang-ups." He met her eyes squarely. "I'm going to stop you from making the mistake of your young life. I grew up with Andrew, for God's sake. He's a year older than I am!"

"He's just thirty-six, hardly a candidate for a nursing home!"

She stopped herself abruptly. "You don't have any right to burst in here and start grilling me... and what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Don't get hysterical," he said soothingly. "I let the lease on my apartment expire and the only quarters I have at the moment are in Central America." His eyebrows arched. "You wouldn't want me to go back there to heal?"

She averted her eyes before he could read the very real fear in them. She looked at the big leg resting on the hassock. The papers had said something about a torn ligament, but the shape of a thick bandage was outlined against one powerful thigh under the khaki fabric. A bandage.

Her eyes went slowly back up to his. "That's no torn ligament," she said hesitantly.

His shaggy head leaned back. "Hard to fool another journalist, isn't it, Wynn?"

Her own face paled. "You've been shot."

He nodded. "Bingo."

She could feel her heart going wild, her knees threatening to buckle. "You were with those journalists who were killed, weren't you, McCabe?" she asked with quiet certainty.

His darkening eyes fell to his leg. "I got away by the skin of my teeth and spent the night in a chicken house. I nearly bled to death before I was able to get back to town."

Her heart was hurting now. She felt oddly sick. She stared at him, memorizing every hard line of his face. It had been a compulsion, even years ago, to look at him. She enjoyed that even when she imagined she hated him. It was an effort to drag her eyes away.

"You're in pain," she said suddenly.

He laughed mirthlessly. "Honey, I've hardly been out of it for the past week, and that's God's own truth."

"How long will it take for it to heal?"

"Another month or so," he said with obvious distaste. "I really do need a place to stay," he said.

She glanced at him warily. "Andy's going to go right through the ceiling."

"Let me handle Andy," he said generously. "Man to man, you know."

That didn't quite ring true, but perhaps she'd misjudged McCabe. She hoped so.

"Won't you be bored to death staying in Redvale for a whole month?" she asked.

"If I didn't have anything to do, I might," he agreed. "I don't have another book due for six months, and I was between assignments, so I took a job here in town."

She stared at him with dawning horror. "What job?"

"Didn't Ed tell you?" he asked pleasantly. "I'm going to edit the paper for the next month while he goes on vacation."

Wynn felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach.

"I quit," she said. "I can't live with you and work with you for a solid month and stay sane!"

He watched her with an odd, quiet smile. "What's the matter, honey, afraid you won't be able to resist me?"

She went scarlet. Before she could think up something bad enough, insulting enough, to say to him, the phone rang. She grabbed up the receiver.

"Andy!" she gasped, glaring at McCabe. Her hand twisted the cord nervously.

"Ed said you'd gone home," her fiancé said suspiciously. "Wynona, have you gone crazy? You simply can't let McCabe stay there!"

"Now, Andy," she said soothingly, trying to ignore McCabe's smug grin.

"I remember McCabe. Can I help feeling threatened?"

"I'm engaged to you," she reminded him, furious at McCabe's open eavesdropping.

"Invite him to supper," McCabe said sotto voce. "I'll cook. Invite him over. About six."

She felt as if she were walking obligingly into a shark's mouth.

SHE WENT BACK to work with a frown between her wide-spaced green eyes. It deepened when she saw Ed.

"You didn't mention that you were taking a vacation," she said with grinning ferocity.

"Have a heart," he groaned. "I just hope he'll give himself time enough to heal before he goes back down there."

She felt the blood leaving her face. She stared blankly at the half-made-up page in front of her.

The hectic pace kept her from thinking about McCabe any more until quit-

ting time. The phones rang off the hook, people walked in and out, there were additions and deletions and changes in ads and copy until Wynn swore she'd walk out the door and never come back. She threatened that every Tuesday. So did Ed. So did Judy. So did Kelly and Jess. It was a standing joke, but nobody laughed at it on Tuesday.

She dragged herself in the door at a few minutes past five, weary and disheveled.

"Is that you, Wynn?" McCabe called from the kitchen.

"It's me." Her heart jumped at the sound of his deep voice.

Ten minutes later, she went into the kitchen and McCabe stopped with a spoon in midair above the stove and just stared.

The backless dress she'd put on was emerald-green jersey. It clung softly to her when she walked.

She said, "I'll make the salad dressing."

"Not in that dress you won't," McCabe said curtly. He moved, leaning heavily on his cane, and was behind her before she knew it. One big warm hand caught her waist firmly and held her away from the counter. "It would be a crime to ruin it."

Her body tingled wildly under his hard fingers, as if she'd waited all her life for him to touch it and bring it to life. She felt herself tremble and hoped he wouldn't feel it.

She moved jerkily away from him. "I... I'll get an apron," she faltered.

McCabe didn't say a word. She glanced at him nervously as she fumbled with jars and bowls and spoons. She looked into his eyes and ached all the way down to her toes.

Before she could move, or run, the doorbell rang sharply. She turned and walked like a zombie to the front door.

Andy's brown hair was rumpled, as if he'd been running his hands through it,

and his dark eyes were troubled. Wynn sighed and led him back toward the dining room.

Andy made an irritated sound. "Does he really cook?"

"Of course I do, Andy," McCabe said from the kitchen doorway, leaning heavily on his cane. "Beef bourguignonne."

Andy gaped at him. "Beef bourguignonne?"

"Sit down and I'll bring it in," McCabe told them.

But Wynn was horrified at the thought. "You sit down," she said coldly, glaring at him. "I don't want stew all over my floors. How in the world do you expect to manage a tureen of that plus your cane?" She went into the kitchen, still muttering.

By the time she had everything organized, there was an odd silence in the dining room. She shot a glare at McCabe.

Supper was a quiet affair. She nibbled at her beef bourguignonne—which was truly excellent, wine-red and thick and full of melty bits of beef and vegetables—and salad, and wondered why Andy was so quiet.

"We had a bad car wreck to cover today," she mentioned, trying to break the cold silence. "Some out-of-state people—"

"For heaven's sake, not while I'm eating!" Andy burst out, making a face at her.

McCabe's eyebrows went up sharply. He leaned back with his coffee in hand and pursed his lips. "Did I ever tell you about the food I had in South America when I was covering the conflict down there a few years back? I went deep into the Amazon with some soldiers and we camped with a primitive tribe in the jungle. We had snake and lizard and some kind of toasted bugs—"

"Excuse me," Andy gasped, leaping to his feet with a napkin held tightly over his

mouth. He ran toward the bathroom and slammed the door.

"McCabe!" Wynn burst out, banging the table with her hand.

He held her eyes and frowned. Then he leaned forward. "You've got a smudge, just here." His big warm hand pressed against her cheek while his thumb ran roughly back and forth across her lips.

Her lips parted as she looked into his darkening eyes. She caught his hand and started to pull it away, but he brought her palm up to his mouth and caressed it softly, tenderly, while his eyes held hers.

She was actually leaning toward him across the scant inches that separated them when the sudden sharp click of the bathroom door opening sent her jerking back into her own chair.

Andy returned, looking pale.

"Feeling better?" McCabe asked pleasantly.

Andy glowered at him. "No, thanks to you."

"Reporters do bring the job home, Andy," the taller man commented. "There are going to be times when Wynn will need to tell you about things she's seen, to save her sanity."

Andy turned to speak to Wynn, and his eyes went homing to her swollen mouth, devoid of lipstick and looking as if it had been hotly and thoroughly kissed. He drew in a harsh breath.

Wynn put a hand to her mouth. "Andy, it wasn't what you're thinking," she said shortly.

"Sure." Andy stood up, almost knocking over his chair. "He's only been here a day, for heaven's sake!"

"I'm a fast worker," McCabe said with a wicked smile.

Andy gave Wynn a killing glance. He whirled and slammed out of the house. A minute later, the roar of his car filled the silence.

"You troublemaker," Wynn accused hotly. "What was the point of that lie?"

"It wasn't a lie," he said calmly. "You'd have let me kiss you."

She stood up. She gathered the dirty dishes, but as she started by him, he caught her around the waist and turned her, pressing his open mouth to her backbone. His lips brushed between her shoulder blades down to her waist. His hand moved slowly, insidiously, to the flatness of her stomach and back up in a warm, lazy circle. Her hand went to catch it, to stop it, and lingered helplessly on the curling hair that covered the back of it.

He let her go all at once and she moved away from him as if she'd been scalded.

She lifted the stack of dishes. It tottered precariously in her hands and she marched into the kitchen stiff-legged, viciously kicking the swinging door closed behind her.

She finished washing up and went back into the living room. Sorting words and explanations in her mind, she marched into the room ready to do battle. McCabe was sitting in his easy chair.

"The wreck bothered you, didn't it?" he asked, studying her over the rim of his coffee cup. "Why?"

She shrugged. "There was a child involved. Two years old. He was killed."

"Who else?"

"The baby's father." She looked at him. "The baby's mother is in a coma. If she lives, think what a horrible awakening she's going to have. I wouldn't want to live, I don't think." Tears welled in her eyes.

He sighed heavily. "Wynn, you have to learn to report the news without becoming part of it. And if you can't handle what you see, it's time to quit."

Her eyes ran over his craggy face. "Can you still handle it, even after what you've seen?"

He smiled carelessly. "Barely. I can take care of myself."

She glanced up. "Sure you can. Look what good shape you came home in!"

He chuckled softly. "So I slipped up. Everybody's entitled to one mistake. I owed your father my life once or twice," he said. "He pulled me out of some hairy situations. I'm only sorry I couldn't do the same for him, the one time it mattered."

"He admired you," she said.

"It was mutual. That's why I agreed to this crazy scheme of his, to oversee your inheritance." His eyes wandered over her slowly. "But I'm just beginning to understand his reasoning."

Her breath sighed out wildly and her hands clenched at her sides. "McCabe..."

His head went back and he studied her arrogantly, intently. "It's just as well I stayed away so long, Wynn."

She hardly understood what he was saying. She was too embarrassed. "It's been a long day. Good night, McCabe."

He watched her go down the hall with a purely predatory gaze. And slowly, calculatingly, he smiled.

*

WYNN HARDLY slept. All night, she kept feeling the touch of McCabe's hard mouth on her back until her skin felt unbearably sensitive. When morning came, she was feeling dragged-out and irritable.

She dressed in faded denim jeans and a T-shirt, because it was Wednesday and they'd all be working in the back to mail out papers.

McCabe was already dressed and in the kitchen. He turned as she walked in.

"Andy called."

She lifted her head. He looked odd. "When?"

"About six."

She glanced at her watch. "Over an hour ago? You didn't wake me."

"I asked Andy if he wanted me to hand you the phone," he murmured.

It took a minute for that to sink in. Her eyes scanned his face and she began to flush. "You didn't!" She got to her feet in one smooth motion. "McCabe, you didn't!"

"I did." He sipped his coffee calmly and raised an eyebrow at her. "He is suspicious, isn't he? He jumped immediately to the conclusion that you were in the bed with me."

She lifted a saucer and slammed it down on the table, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

JESS STAMPED the papers that went out to local post offices, while Wynn put the single-wraps that went outside the local area into prestamped lightweight brown bags. McCabe handled the phone and the front office while the rest of them sacked and lifted and tied bundles and loaded the truck that carried the papers the five miles to the post office. By the end of the day Wynn was black down the front from newsprint and her face was smeared with it.

She was just about to leave the office when Judy motioned her to the telephone.

"Hello," she said dully.

"Wynn?" Andy asked, his tone conciliatory. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

She brightened. "I'd love to. And despite what McCabe might have told you, I sleep alone," she added curtly.

"He just rattled me," came the embarrassed reply. "I can't keep my wits around him."

You're not the only one, she thought, but didn't say it.

THEY HAD dinner out and went to see a comedy at a local theater before they drove back to Redvale, apparently in perfect accord for the time being.

Andy walked Wynn to the porch, and was just giving her his usual gentle good-

night kiss when the door opened and McCabe appeared.

"What do you mean, bringing Wynn back home at this hour?" McCabe asked curtly, checking his watch. "You keep her out this late again, Andy, and you'll regret it."

And before Andy could decide what to say, McCabe had jerked Wynn into the room and slammed the door.

"Where were you?" he asked curtly.

"Eating supper," she stammered. "And seeing a play." She tossed down her purse and glared at him, getting some of her wind back. "What business is it of yours? And how dare you give my fiancé the third degree!"

"My, how your eyes do sparkle when you get mad," he murmured approvingly. "Missing your good-night kiss, honey?" He chuckled, moving closer.

"Don't you dare!" she exclaimed as he reached for her. She pushed at his broad chest, but he only tugged her closer.

His cheek moved against hers as his lips smoothed over soft skin, down into the neck of her dress. "You smell of gardenia. Sultry and sweet and womanly." His nose rubbed softly against hers and the feel of him was beginning to do the wildest kinds of things to her pulse. She felt her breasts flattening under the crush of his chest, felt the warm abrasive brush of his jaw. Her hands touched his cheeks hesitantly before they moved up into the cool thickness of his blond hair.

His mouth coaxed hers open with a tantalizing pressure that made her wild with need. She arched up against him, surging with hungers she'd suppressed all her life, until this moment.

He jerked up, his eyes glittering as they met hers, and he smiled slowly. "You're passionate, Wynn. Andy isn't. And that's what's eating you up. Because I can match you, and he can't."

She got away and stood glaring at him, her eyes wild, her hair a glorious tangle, her very posture expressing fury.

"Andy respects me," she panted.

"I respect you, too. I respect you enough to want all of you."

"Stop!" she burst out. She almost threw something at him. But she couldn't think of anything big enough to make a dent in his monumental arrogance, so she turned and stormed into her bedroom and slammed the door violently.

THE NEXT night, they were no sooner home from work than the phone rang. McCabe picked it up, listened, glared at it and handed it to Wynn.

"It's Romeo," he growled. "Don't tie up the line, if you don't mind. I've got a call coming through from New York."

He hobbled off.

"You didn't get into any trouble last night, did you?" Andy asked. "I meant to call sooner, but I got tied up."

"I'm fine," she replied.

"Good. McCabe looked... I wish you'd get him out of the house, Wynn."

"Why don't you come and do it for me?" she asked with venomous sweetness.

He cleared his throat. "I've got to do some paperwork," he said. "How about dinner Friday?"

"Sure."

"See you soon, darling," he said. "Goodbye."

McCabe glared at her when she joined him in the kitchen.

"My, my, you do have long conversations with your loved one, don't you?" he asked.

Her nostrils flared. "You did ask me to keep it brief. That phone call you're expecting," she said uneasily. "It wouldn't be from your wire service?"

He glanced down at her, frowning. "Wynn, I'm still on the payroll," he said quietly.

"You don't have to explain it to me," she said tautly.

He tilted her face up to his. "Don't I?" He searched her face for a long moment.

"I'm here for a rest, and to help you get sorted out. Then I'll go where they send me."

Her eyes searched his. "You write adventure novels, too," she reminded him coolly. "You've made the bestseller list several times."

"And someday I'll write novels for the rest of my life, and I'll enjoy that, too. But, Wynn," he murmured, cupping her face in his hands, "I'm still too young and too restless to settle down. I don't want any ties. You're tangling me up in a web I don't like," he murmured absently.

"I didn't ask you to come here," she managed.

"Yes, I know. But I needed something," he said. His hands shifted onto her rib cage. "I think I needed to know that it would matter, if I died," he said unexpectedly, lifting his eyes to catch the surprise in hers. "Do you know what Ed told me, Wynn? He said that you wouldn't even watch newscasts about Central America."

She swallowed down a surge of nervous energy.

"Were you afraid for me, Wynn?" His hands on her waist contracted.

"I've known you for a long time," she muttered, raising her gaze to his chiseled mouth. "Of course it matters."

"Why don't you go into politics?" he asked. "You're so damned good at avoiding the issue, you'd be a natural."

"I'm not avoiding anything." She pushed at his chest. "Oh, McCabe, stop confusing me!"

"Then stop avoiding the issue," he murmured. "Stop throwing Andy between us."

She lifted her head to protest, but before she could get the words out, the phone rang again. She made a beeline for her bedroom, leaning back exhausted against the door. McCabe was tearing her safe world apart, and she didn't have the faintest idea how to stop him.

AFTER A HECTIC week, Andy took Wynn to dinner. McCabe hadn't said anything when Andy came to pick her up, aside from a curt nod and a glare for Wynn.

"Well, at least he's stopped grinning at me like a Cheshire cat," Andy remarked during the ride home. "Didn't you see the glare he gave me when I put my arm around you? As if you were his personal property! I tell you, Wynn, you've got to get him out of that house. People are starting to talk all over town about it."

"Andy, you know what kind of condition he's in!" she exclaimed.

"He manages to get to the office every day, though, doesn't he?" Andy asked.

"That doesn't mean he's capable in other areas," she said hotly.

"How do you know?" he asked suspiciously. "Have you tried?"

It was a good thing they were pulling into her driveway, because she'd have jumped out onto the highway rather than put up with another second of his suspicions.

"How can you say such a thing?"

"Well, there's more than one position for people to make love in."

She swallowed. "As it happens, you're absolutely right about McCabe and me," she said, feeling the words burst out of her in indignation and anguish. "We're lovers. I sleep with him every night. He's wonderful in bed, Andy, really wonderful."

He blanched and his hand lifted. He slapped her. Slowly she took the ring from her finger and dropped it on the floorboard. Then she opened the door and got out, leaving him alone in the car.

The house was quiet. She went to the liquor cabinet and poured a generous measure of bourbon into a glass, added ice and water, and proceeded to get soused.

She was halfway through her second glass when McCabe made an appearance. He was limping badly.

She lifted the glass in an exaggerated toast. "Abhhh." She sighed. "Isn't liquor great? I wonder why I never drank before?"

He moved closer. Then he saw the livid red mark on her cheek and his eyes exploded with anger.

"Did he hit you?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, he hit me," she muttered. "And it's all your fault, McCabe. All your fault." She felt morose and reckless, all at once. "You're my lover, did you know?" she asked with a laugh.

Her eyes ran over his broad bronzed chest with the thick wedge of hair that ran down it to his belt buckle. "You have the most marvelous body," she said, as the liquor dragged the truth out of her.

"Wynn, you're drunk."

"I sure am, darling. Isn't that what you called me the other night before you kissed me? I didn't tell Andy you kissed me, McCabe."

"I'm glad about that, at least," he muttered.

"No, I just told him we were lovers," she continued, and laughed at the shock that widened his eyes. "Well, it was what he wanted to hear. I even gave him back the ring." She put down the glass and leaned back. "Why don't you come to bed with me, McCabe." Her hand went to her blouse and she unbuttoned the buttons and unclipped her bra.

"I'll even take off my clothes..." she was offering.

He caught her, pushing her roughly back while he clipped the bra back in place, his face oddly strained, his eyes dark and glittering. He took her arm and pulled her toward the hall.

"Get in there," he said harshly, "and put on your gown while I make some black coffee."

He thrust her into her room, snapped on the light and hobbled painfully back to get his cane.

With an uncaring sigh, she stripped off her clothes and dragged on an old cotton gown. She felt wonderful.

"I'm not engaged anymore," she sang, collapsing on the bed on her back as McCabe returned, his face like thunder.

He sat down beside her, grimacing with the movement, and handed her the coffee. "Drink it."

She lifted her eyes to McCabe's bare chest and felt herself going warm all over.

"I never liked Andy without a shirt," she said absently. "You're..." She blinked, trying to find a word to describe it. "Sexy," she said triumphantly, lifting her eyes.

Whatever she expected to see in his face, it wasn't pain. But he was almost white with it, and the sight was more sobering than the coffee.

"Your leg," she said softly. "Oh, McCabe, your poor leg. And I didn't even think, and you were walking without your cane!"

"My leg is all right," he said coldly.

There was a curious silence around them, and it forced her eyes up to his. They were glittering under his thick lashes. Almost as if he couldn't help it, his hand went toward her gown where ten pearl buttons fastened it from collarbone to waist. He looked down at his own big callused hands and watched as his fingers unlooped the first, then the second, the third...

Unconsciously her body lifted, an involuntary kind of pleading.

Very gently he took her shoulders and drew her up against his broad bare chest, closing his arms around her. Her cheek slid softly against his as he drew her even closer until her bareness was warming his. He didn't say a word. He just held her, rocking her slowly, sweetly, against the warmth of him.

A long moment later, he drew back. He looked down at the soft bareness of her body one last time before he helped her back into the gown.

His nose nuzzled hers, his lips brushed softly over hers, biting at them until her mouth opened hotly. Her nails moved restlessly against his chest and he moaned sharply.

But all at once he sat up. "No," he said.

She swallowed, her body aching.

"You've had a shock tonight," he said, watching her, "and too damned much liquor to know what you're doing."

"You weren't drunk," she stated.

He shook his head. "No, I wasn't." He brushed her face with his fingers, studying every inch of it. "Why did you think I was in pain?"

"Your face was white," she said. "And you looked . . . so agonized."

"Haven't you ever seen a man eaten up with desire before?" he asked matter-of-factly.

She turned beet red and dropped her eyes to his chest. "No," she admitted after a minute. When she looked up, he was only smiling.

His eyes darkened. "I wanted you tonight, Wynn," he said. "I wanted you obsessively, and because of that I'm going to get on a plane tomorrow and fly up to New York for the weekend. I'm going to put some space between us until we cool off."

"I won't seduce you," she said bitterly.

"You could," he said, watching her. "You could seduce me just by walking into the room and touching me."

That shocked her, and he nodded when he saw the betraying wideness of her eyes.

"So, that being the case, I feel like a brief vacation." He got up and moved slowly away from the bed toward the door. "I can't think of a time in my life when I've been so aroused so fast. I'd almost forgotten that I was a man." He stared across the room at her. "I keep wondering how it would be with you," he said huskily. "Your body and mine with

nothing between us, and the cool night air washing over us while we made love. . . ."

"Go away!" she whispered.

"I am," he reminded her. "And now you know why."

SHE MISSED McCabe. She always had, ever since he'd left Redvale all those years ago, even though she hadn't admitted it. She'd missed him, worried about him, brooded over him.

She wandered around, lingering helplessly in McCabe's room. Her eyes wandered over the bed he slept in, and glared at the battered suitcase he'd left behind with its multicolor stickers from all the countries he'd visited. And every time she remembered how it had felt to hold him and be kissed by him, she wanted to wail. It was going to make it so much worse when he left.

Late Sunday night McCabe walked in, leaning heavily on the cane. He looked worn and tired. "I feel as if I've had part of my thigh sawed off." He sat down heavily in the chair, rubbing his leg. "Wynn, could you make me a cup of coffee?" he asked wearily. "And do you have an aspirin in the house?"

"I'll get them," she said.

Minutes later, when the aspirin was working and he'd finished his second cup of coffee, he studied her.

"I did a lot of thinking while I was gone," he said quietly.

"About what?"

He laughed shortly. "You know perfectly well about what." He shifted, grimacing as he shifted his legs. "About reorganizing your life for you."

She glanced at him warily. "Does that mean you're going to stop interfering?"

"Oh, not at all, darling," he drawled, smiling at her confusion. "As a matter of fact, I've decided that I was right in the first place. You need Andy like a hole in the head. A man who'll knock a woman around is lower than a snake's belly."

"I provoked him by telling him I was sleeping with you."

"I wouldn't have hit you."

"No," she agreed. "Probably you would have kissed me, the way you did Friday night."

He searched her face, and the room was suddenly alive with tension and remembered passion. "That backfired on me, didn't it?" he murmured. "I never meant to get so involved."

She felt herself go hot. Her lips parted. "I... I have my own life here and I like it. I don't want to... complicate it."

"You don't want to sleep with me," he interpreted. "Why?"

Her eyes fell. "Because I couldn't survive it."

"At the moment, I'm doubtful if I could, either," he said, touching his thigh with a harsh laugh. "But with the right encouragement..."

She blushed to her hairline and stood up. "I need to get some sleep. Mondays are rough."

He got to his feet and stood in her way as she started past him. "I missed you," he said shortly. "I didn't like that—missing someone."

"Join the club," she said with a nervous laugh.

She went into her room and closed the door before she weakened and threw herself onto his big body and begged him to love her.

*

MONDAY WAS always frantic, the last full day to gather news and ads, since the press deadline was at noon on Tuesday. Wynn covered a visit from the lieutenant governor of the state, who was in Redvale to see firsthand the necessity for the mayor's proposed water-system expansion. By the time she'd driven to the airport, followed him around with the camera and taken pictures and then got

back to the office to write the story, the piece had already taken all morning.

"I want this ready by the deadline too," McCabe said curtly, tossing a page of copy at her.

She glanced at it and frowned. "This is a suicide," she told him. "Ed doesn't run suicides."

"Ed isn't here. It's news. Print it."

"This is a small town," she shot back, rising to battle. "You're only here to recuperate, but I live here twenty-four hours a day, and so do Ed and the rest of the staff. You may be a big-time journalist, and the manner of a man's death may not mean that much to you, but here it's a matter of honor. Did you even notice his last name?" she added, gesturing toward the copy. "His family is one of the oldest and finest in the community. When we needed a city park, they donated land. When the Burnes family was burned out, they gave them a home until they could find a new one. Those are special people, McCabe, and I can't see trading on their tragedy to fill a hole on your front page." She got up from the desk. "If you want to run it, go ahead, but you rewrite it and please add your byline. And if you do run it you can have my resignation."

He was watching her with narrowed eyes. "You're too soft, Wynn. You care too much."

"Isn't that better than being dead inside?" she returned hotly. "You've been in international journalism too long," she said quietly. "You've forgotten how it is in small towns. I meant it. If you print this—" she picked up the story—"I'll go right out the door. And tomorrow's Tuesday."

He drew in a deep breath. "That's blackmail." He lifted his chin arrogantly. "But if you feel that strongly about it, I'll back down this once." He emphasized the last two words. "In the meantime, you remember that I'm editing this paper, and I'll do it my way."

"Yes, McCabe," she said with a sweet, demure smile.

Later that afternoon, there was a bank robbery. Wynn heard it come over the police scanner.

She was putting her pad and pen into her purse when McCabe walked in.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"There's a bank robbery in progress at Farmer's Bank," she burst out. "I'm on my way."

"Oh no, you're not!" he growled, taking the camera away from her. "Sit down."

"McCabe!"

"Sit down, I said!" he barked harshly, forcing her down into the chair. "Bank robbers carry guns, you little fool!" He looked oddly pale. "You sit there and listen on the scanner. You can go down and get pix of them carrying him off to jail when the police make an arrest. But you don't leave this office while it's going down, do you understand?"

His face was set into rigid lines, and for the first time since he'd been back, she saw the man underneath the careless, easygoing mask. She saw right through to the steel that had carried him through all the years in the front lines.

"Do you know how big a hole a pistol makes? I was shot at point-blank range with a pistol," he told her flatly. "And except for a friend in the junta who knocked the guard's arm and then helped me escape, it would have been through the head. I was being executed for trying to save those other journalists."

She burst into tears as the impact of what he'd confessed hit her.

"Now, you know," he said with a cold smile. "So don't get adventurous." And he turned and went back out, closing the office door behind him.

She hardly heard the scanner at all. She couldn't seem to stop crying. McCabe was being executed, executed, executed... If not for that soldier, he'd be dead now. And when he was healed, he

was going to climb on a plane and fly straight back to that other world, that bloody world. And she knew she'd never survive the fear again. It was one thing to worry about a man she'd hero-worshiped, quite another to worry about a man she loved.

Ten minutes later, Kelly burst into the room, all eyes. "I just heard about the robbery on my scanner," he said excitedly. "They've made an arrest. Can I go... would you mind? I'll get good pix, honest I will."

Wynn handed him the camera like a zombie. And he was gone like a shot.

SHE WENT TO sleep early that night, emotionally exhausted, and found herself sitting straight up in bed hours later as a wild, harsh cry woke her. It was coming from McCabe's room.

She burst in without even knocking and found him thrashing like a madman on the crisp white sheets.

"McCabe," she said, shaking him.

She shook him again, harder, and he jerked upright. He caught his breath sharply and there was a strange glitter in his eyes.

"Oh, God," he ground out, shaking. "Someday I'm afraid I won't wake up in time..."

She drew his shaggy head down on her shoulder. "It's all right," she said softly.

He held her, shaking and damp with sweat, his heart thundering. "That was one hell of a nightmare."

Her hands soothed him. "McCabe, tell me about it."

"No." He held her tight.

"You're not invulnerable," she replied. "There's no shame in fear."

"I suppose that most people with a pistol against their temples would feel fear," he agreed. "I dream about it all the time, except that when I dream, there's no friendly soldier there to save me."

She caught one of his big hands in hers and held it, savoring its callused warmth.

So he told her about the fighting and the slaughter. About the children lying dead in the streets and the native journalists who were put to death if they dared to print anything unfavorable to the regime. And then, slowly, reluctantly, about the death of his friends and how it had been when the soldiers took him out of the small, stifling rock building with the dirt floor, and one of their number had put a pistol to his head.

She stood up, disengaging her hand. "Why do it at all?" she demanded.

"Because someone has to!" he shot at her. "I love my work, Wynn. I always have. And I told you, I don't need ties."

"So you did. But I do," she said defiantly. "You just go back to your jungles and get yourself killed. I'll marry Andy and sleep with him and have his babies."

"I'll kill him first!" he said passionately.

She jumped at the violence in his voice.

"I'm too old," he began hotly, "to be remodeled or renovated. I am not changing professions and I am not marrying you."

"I haven't asked you to," she said reasonably.

"You'll find someone...a man who'll be able to give you what you want."

Did he know, she thought with terror, did he realize that she loved him? She finally met his gaze, uncertainty and apprehension in her eyes, and he searched them slowly.

"I'm not domesticated," he said in a husky voice.

"I haven't said a word," she reminded him. "You do what you like, McCabe. Now that you mention it," she added, wanting to goad him, "I've always wondered what it would be like to work for the wire services."

His face actually paled. "Oh, no, you don't."

"I'm over twenty-one," she reminded him. "The Middle East would be interesting to me. I could see the pyramids. What a wonderful idea!"

"No way, Wynn. I'll stop you!"

"How?" she asked calmly.

He blinked, as if the question caught him off guard, and just stared at her.

She could hear him cursing roundly as she started down the hall to her own room, and she smiled. Let him chew on that possibility for a while and see how he liked it!

THE NEXT morning McCabe looked like a volcano about to erupt.

"You are not going to join the wire-service staff," he told her without any attempt at civility.

Her eyebrows rose. "I'm not?"

He lifted his head and stared at her for a long moment.

She pushed her chair away from the table. "There's no time for discussion. It's press day." She groaned. "Maybe I'll just quit right now and save myself the bother of doing it around two o'clock like I usually do."

And by late afternoon he was agreeing with her. There wasn't enough time. But somehow they finished up and put the pages into the flat box, and Kelly rushed out the door with them on his way to the printer.

"I quit!" McCabe said shortly, rubbing his thigh with a big weary hand.

"Too late," Wynn told him. "You have to quit by two, or nobody listens to you."

He looked down at her, his eyes warm and quiet and searching.

"We'd better get home," she said. "We have to cover a city-council meeting tonight. They're going to discuss the water system."

They had a quick supper and went straight to city hall, and Wynn was frankly amused at the stares they got. Everyone knew McCabe was her house

guest, but most of the people she dealt with hadn't seen him in years. The impact he had on the townspeople was fascinating.

Harry Lawson shook hands with him before the meeting was called to order.

"If you've already put the paper to bed, you may have to tear up your front page after this meeting," he confided. "I got a terrific piece of news late this afternoon."

Wynn's eyes widened. "He got the money he was counting on from the governor."

McCabe glanced down at her as they eased into chairs near the front of the crowded room.

"You really are interested in this water-system expansion project, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." She looked up. "Everybody thinks we can't ever run out of water. But we can, McCabe. The water table is already dropping, and the increased demand from municipalities and industry and agriculture is beginning to catch up with supply."

He stared at her. "We've got two major rivers feeding our water supply."

"I think you ought to read that water study in my files," she told him. "Every drop of water in them both will have been allocated within ten years."

"My God!"

McCabe turned back toward the podium, where the mayor was calling the meeting to order. His eyes were interested for the first time, and he began taking notes and asking questions.

The mayor's news was that the governor had allowed Redvale ten thousand dollars. When the time came for a vote, the city council went unanimously for the project.

"What were you talking to Harry about after the meeting?" Wynn asked McCabe as she headed the car toward home.

"Water," he confessed with a sideways grin. "I told him I'd be glad to do some public-relations work for him gratis if he needed it. It might make a good feature story for one of the national magazines."

"You're super," she said quietly.

"I'm glad you think so. No, don't go home. Let's go get the front page. I'll have to tear it up to make room for this story. I'm beginning to see that there are quite a few big challenges even in small towns."

It was midnight when they got home. It was a good thing the printer was an accommodating gentleman, Wynn thought with a smile. But then, he was an old newspaperman himself, and understood.

Wynn had already started to her room when McCabe called her name and hobbled up to her. He drew her against him. His hands linked behind her back at her waist and he lowered his forehead to rest against her own. "Wynn, you didn't really mean what you said about going back to Andy, did you?" he asked, as if it really mattered.

"No," she whispered shakily, wanting nothing more than to lie in his arms and do all the things she'd dreamed of doing with him.

His lips parted and his breath came roughly. "I want to lie with you," he breathed against her mouth. "I want to lie with you and on you and under you, Wynn." His big hands slid up and down her back.

She shook her head. "I couldn't bear it," she whispered. She lowered her eyes to his chest. "I can't."

"Yes you can!" he burst out. His hands caught the back of her head and held it while his mouth lowered onto hers and he kissed her until she moaned and clung.

"Wynn," he whispered, anguished, as his hands moved to her breasts and cupped them softly, warmly. "Oh,

Wynn, Wynn, I've never wanted anyone so much!"

"I want you, too," she managed. "But do you really think that I could take that kind of intimacy with you in my stride, and pass it off as a pleasant interlude?"

He frowned slightly.

"In my world, intimacy is between man and wife, and it means something. And before you make some cutting remark, no, I don't expect you to offer me marriage for a few hours of fooling around."

He looked as if she'd hit him. His eyes searched hers. "I want to lie down with you and love you," he said softly. "Is that such a shameful thing?"

Her eyes closed and tears stung them. "No," she whispered. "But I couldn't bear having nothing but the memory of it, after you leave."

His hands stilled on her waist and she heard his breath go ragged. "What are you telling me?"

"I can't be intimate with you and then watch you walk out of my life. It would tear me apart. It's bad enough already!" She slumped, letting all the tension out in one unsteady breath as her eyes closed. "I love you," she whispered.

He didn't speak. He seemed to stop breathing. The hands on the nape of her neck stilled and she felt his body tauten where it touched hers.

She hadn't realized how she'd been hoping that he'd be happy about her confession, that he'd tell her he felt the same and ask her to marry him and the future would be rosy and bright. But he didn't speak. And she felt rejection more sharply than any she'd felt in her life.

She drew away from him. He was watching her. Just watching her. And she was afraid to look up and see what might be in his eyes, because she couldn't bear pity.

"You needn't worry, I'm not going to threaten to throw myself under a train or

anything," she said, moving to open her bedroom door. "I just thought it might make things easier if you understand the situation. I'm...very vulnerable with you. So stop making passes, will you?" she added on an unsteady laugh. "Because it's all a game to you. But it isn't to me."

She turned away, but his hand caught her arm and gently turned her back.

"Wynn," he said softly, "it's no game."

And before she could protest, he lifted her face to his and kissed her. It was slow and fierce, but achingly tender.

"Does this feel like fun and games?" he whispered over her lips. "Do I feel like a man who's playing?"

He lifted his head, and she could see the turmoil in his face that she'd already felt in the tremor of his body.

"We'll get married," he said in a voice she hardly recognized. "Just as soon as I can get a license."

Her lips parted. "No."

"Yes." He bent and kissed her again, slowly, lazily, smiling when he felt her body lift to meet his.

"You...you'll just hate yourself," she whispered, "when the newness wears off, when you've had me." Her eyes were tortured. "I'd rather we just slept together...."

He shook his head. "I can't take you in my stride, either, Wynn. So we'll get married, and we'll see how it goes."

"And you'll rush right back off to Central America at the first opportunity," she said.

"I've already told you that I don't intend giving it up," he said curtly. "It's my life."

"Yes, I can see that," she said, her voice sad and bitter. "I won't marry you, McCabe. I won't stay here and try to work, worrying about whether or not you're going to die in some jungle."

"You want it all your own way, I suppose," he replied, his eyes glittering and

blatantly unloverlike. He moved away from her to light a cigarette. "You want me to stay in Redvale and write books and forget all about it. Is that how the song goes?"

"Chorus and verse," she returned. "I am not having babies alone. What will I tell the children? Yes, you have a daddy, here's his picture, and you'll actually get to see him between wars!"

He was looking more thunderous by the second. "You're being unreasonable, Wynn, and you know it."

She nodded, her green eyes blazing. "So what are you offering me, McCabe? A few nights rolling around in bed with you once or twice a year?" She studied his tanned face under its disheveled blond hair, and loved him until it hurt. "No deal, McCabe, I won't marry you, and I won't sleep with you. Andy may not be for me, but eventually I'll find someone else I can love enough to marry. A man who's willing to give as much as he takes."

He looked dangerous for an instant, his eyes charcoal gray and savage. "What are you giving?" he taunted. "Just your body and a profession of love?"

"The body is standard issue," she said. "If you just want one for a night or two, may I suggest that you drive up to the city with a few fifty-dollar bills and stand on a street corner downtown?" She moved into her room. "My profession of love was a nasty mistake. You can forget I ever said it. As cheaply as you're treating it, it must not be worth much after all." And she closed the door on his shocked face and locked it.

MCCABE was sipping coffee at the breakfast table when she went in. "I poured you a cup when I heard you stirring," he said coolly. "It should still be hot." He pushed it toward her as she sat down. "I'm going to finish out this week and go back to work."

She was expecting it, but it hurt just the same. Why did her eyes have to fill up with tears now?

"Did you hear me?" he ground out.

She tried to speak, but couldn't, so she nodded.

"No argument?" His eyes glittered.

She shook her head jerkily.

She took a sip of coffee, but her hand was trembling so that she had to put the cup down again.

"Wynn, don't do this!" he said in a voice that was anguished. He got up from his chair and reached for her suddenly, dragging her up into his arms and holding her close enough to bruise her. His cheek scraped her skin, his mouth searching blindly for hers. He found it with a muffled groan and he kissed her and kissed her, tasting tears and feeling uncertain about where they came from.

"McCabe," she sobbed against his warm mouth. Her arms tightened around his neck as she kissed him back. "I don't care if you leave," she whispered, her green eyes swimming in tears. "I don't care!"

"Yes, I can see that," he said unsteadily. He held her face in his big warm hands. "Don't cry," he said softly. "You don't know how it hurts me to watch you."

She dabbed at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I'm sorry I've made things hard for you," she said softly. "I won't interfere in your life anymore. I'll take what you can give and I won't ask for the moon. Okay?" She looked up at him with such love and trust in her green eyes that he groaned.

"You make me feel like the worst heel God ever made," he ground out. "But I can't quit, Wynn, not...just yet. In a few years, maybe I can settle for small-town politics and writing books. But...not yet. I wish I could. I wish I could give you everything you want, the moon, the stars...a roomful of roses."

"All right," she said, capitulating totally.

"No argument?" he asked suspiciously.

She shook her head with a quiet, sad smile. "I love you," she said simply. Then her lower lip trembled and spoiled the whole effect.

His teeth ground together and he sighed, drawing her close. "Wynn, marry me. I can't live without you now. I've faced that squarely."

She felt the same way, but he already knew that. She moved closer.

He kissed her warmly, slowly, rocking her softly against him from side to side in a wildly erotic rhythm.

"I said the first time I kissed you that you were passionate," he murmured, lifting his head to look into her eyes. "But I didn't know the half of it, did I, darling? Sweet and wild in my arms, as abandoned a lover as any man could want."

"We... aren't lovers," she whispered.

"Not yet," he murmured, bending to kiss her tenderly.

She felt him shudder and her eyes widened. "Oh, McCabe," she whispered, awed. Her fingers touched his face, tenderly for all the fierce emotion she felt. "I'll let you."

He swallowed, and his eyes dropped to her lips. "I want to," he said. "But I don't think I want to spoil things."

Her misty eyes questioned him and he laughed self-consciously and brushed the disheveled dark hair away from her face.

"It's different, somehow," he said slowly. "I want you in white satin walking down the aisle. I want the whole world to know that you didn't toss your principles down the drain and go promiscuous even when the rest of the world did." He frowned slightly, watching her. "And I want it in a church, even if we just have a small ceremony. I want everything proper and aboveboard," he added on a sigh.

She loved him more at that moment than she ever had. She nuzzled her face into his shoulder. "Will you wear my ring, too?"

"If you like."

"Of course I like," she muttered, sliding her head back to glare up at him. "I don't want other women thinking you're available. My gosh, competition is fierce these days."

"As if you'd have to worry about that," he mused. He watched her, relaxed, delighted. "Aren't we supposed to go to work today?" he asked lazily.

She gasped, running to find a clock. "It's nine-thirty!" she exclaimed. "We're late."

"My, my," he murmured, grinning at her blush. "What a pity we aren't already married.... Speaking of that, we'll get the license and the blood tests this morning, and next week we can put the wedding in the paper. We'll get Jess and Judy to be witnesses, Kelly can give you away. We'll let old preacher Barnes marry us in the Presbyterian church...." He glanced at Wynn, who was feeling shell-shocked by the speed with which he was planning. "You're still Presbyterian?" And when she nodded in a dazed way, he continued, "And we can be married Saturday. Okay?"

She was still nodding, feeling her whole life pass before her eyes.

"Come on, before you freeze in that position," he said, taking her arm. "We've got a lot of loose ends to tie up. Move, darling."

She followed him out the door. Those few days went by in an incredible rush. It was Friday afternoon, the blood tests were over, the license was in McCabe's pocket, the ceremony was set for ten o'clock the next morning, and Wynn was staring at a wall in the office trying to imagine being married to McCabe. He'd gone off to a civic-club luncheon and hadn't returned, but he'd been muttering something about going with the

mayor to a budget meeting, so he was probably going to be late. She smiled. One more night alone in her bed, and then...

The sudden trill of the telephone caught her off guard, and she picked it up.

"Redvale Courier. Wynn Ascot speaking."

"Just the girl," said one of the women she knew from the drugstore. "Listen, do you know what's going on over at the cotton gin? Old Mike Hamm said he heard they'd cornered an escaped murderer over there."

There was something muffled, then the woman's voice again. "That was Ben, with the fire department—I ran out and caught him as he went by the door. He said it's two escaped murderers from the prison in Reidsville. One of them had family south of here. The police stopped the stolen car and Randy Turner's been shot."

"Randy!" He was a young man with a wife and baby who'd been with the police department only six months. "How is he?"

"Bad. They don't know if he'll live. Ben thought he heard them say they'd made an arrest. Thank God, can you imagine—"

"I'd better get over there, if I want my pix," Wynn interrupted. "Thanks for the tip! That's one I owe you!"

"Anytime."

Wynn grabbed up her camera and stuck a pad and pen in her purse. "Be back soon," she called to Judy. "They've just arrested a couple of escaped murderers at the gin!"

"Be careful!" Judy called after her.

"I'm always careful," she called back.

She knew a back way to the gin, so she took it, weaving down an alley toward the metal building, which was deserted now that peanuts and soybeans were the main crop instead of cotton.

Her skirts flew as she turned the corner... and found herself suddenly, sickeningly, in front of a leveled pistol, held by one of two badly dressed men coming straight down the alley toward her.

*

BOTH MEN were flushed and sweating wildly, and she could smell their fear. Or was it her own?

The shorter man thrust her hand behind her, angrily dislodging the camera and purse from her shoulder and slamming them to the ground. "Now, hold still, lady!" he growled.

"Hey, fuzz!" the taller man yelled as the three of them pressed against the corner of the building where the alley led to the street.

The police chief stood up behind his car. Wynn recognized Bill Davis.

"We picked up a passenger," the tall man yelled. "A lady. With a big camera."

"Wynn!" Bill burst out.

The tall man raised his voice. "Now, you just do like I say and she won't get hurt. I want a helicopter. And a pilot to fly us anywhere I say."

There was a pause and voices rumbling. "I can't get a chopper in less than two hours!" Davis called back. "But there's a light aircraft at the airport, the pilot's right here. He says he'll take you up."

The two men looked at each other. "They'll bring in more fuzz and pretty soon they might decide to rush us. We got no choice!" the tall one said.

The taller man relaxed a little, but the gun pressed harder against her throat.

"Maybe we could take her with us," the shorter one said. "Yeah, Jack, we can take her along!"

Jack nodded.

"Okay, fuzz, we'll take the plane," the one convict yelled at the policemen. "But the broad comes with us."

"I understand," Bill Davis said calmly. He yelled to his men to put away their weapons.

And then the longest walk of Wynn's life began. The pistol barrel was cold and hard in the small of her back, and she was trembling.

The men were nervous, wildly nervous, and she understood. The threat of being shot and killed was enough to make anyone shake.

The men jerked her out onto the sidewalk, and the first person Wynn saw, standing rigidly beside Bill Davis, was McCabe! He was leaning heavily on the cane.

"This is the pilot," Davis said, nodding at McCabe. "He'll fly you out."

McCabe limped forward on the cane. His eyes were on the two men and they didn't waver as he came close. McCabe stopped just in front of Wynn. "You just let the lady go, and I'll be your hostage. Okay?"

The two escapees looked at each other nervously.

"He's crippled," the one called Jack muttered. "Hell, it'll be easier just watching one of them. We'll take him."

The other one loosened his grip and finally released Wynn altogether. But she didn't move. What if they shot McCabe, for God's sake?

The convict leveled the pistol at McCabe.

McCabe gave it a hard stare, and Wynn imagined he was remembering another time, another place.

"He ain't gonna try nothing," the taller man said with a sarcastic grin. "Are you, big man? You're just a cripple."

"That's been said about one time too many," McCabe growled in a dangerously soft voice. And before anyone realized what that tone meant, he moved. Quickly, as if his leg were in mint condition, he shot forward, grabbing the smaller man's arm to jerk him forward. McCabe's massive fist connected with a

crunch. The man cried out and sank to the ground, leaving the pistol behind in McCabe's hand. He swung backward without even looking, slamming the pistol barrel straight into the face of the second convict and sending him reeling into the arms of the police. It happened so fast that Wynn's eyes blinked incredulously. And the look on McCabe's impassive face was as calm as milk in a bowl, until he turned his head and she got a look at his eyes.

The police chief's men got the groggy convicts to their feet and marched them off to patrol cars.

The chief took off his hat and wiped his sweaty brow. "That was a terrible chance you took, McCabe!"

"Before you explode, look at this." McCabe broke open the chamber of the police special the convict had carried and showed it to Davis.

"Empty!" the policeman burst out.

McCabe told him, "When the little guy pointed it at me, the look in the man's eyes told me he was bluffing. That was all I needed."

Davis studied him. "What if the gun had been loaded?"

"I'd be dead," he said simply. He was staring at Wynn, his eyes blazing, glittering. "Are you all right?" he asked in a deep, husky tone.

She swallowed and nodded. "I'm all right," she said weakly, and managed a smile. "Sorry I got in the way, Bill. I thought they said you'd made an arrest."

"Never trust a rumor. Don't you know that?" He patted Wynn on the back. "Stick to reporting and leave catching crooks to us, will you, Wynn?"

"Sure, Bill," she said shakily.

McCabe took Wynn's arm and escorted her back down the alley. He was grim and unsmiling.

He took Wynn into the office and pulled her into his arms. The arms holding her trembled, his body trembled.

"Oh, God," he ground out huskily. "I've never been so afraid in all my life!"

She smoothed the hair at the nape of his strong neck. "It's all right, darling," she whispered softly. "I'm fine, really I am."

"I could have lost you."

"But you didn't," she said softly.

"And a miss is as good as a mile, isn't it?"

"No, it damned well isn't!" He took in a sharp breath and lifted his head. His face was paper white, his eyes filled with raw emotion. "That's it. You're quitting. You're going to go home and have babies and raise roses! But you're not going to work here."

Her eyes widened. "It's my job!"

"It was," he said coldly. "Not anymore."

"You won't give up your job, why should I?"

He stood there staring at her, and all the expression drained out of his face. Every last bit of it. "This is how you felt when I told you how I got shot, isn't it?" he asked slowly, with dawning realization. "This... sickening coldness is just exactly what you felt."

She nodded. "Just exactly."

He took a deep breath and studied her pale face.

"Well—" he sighed heavily "—I guess I'd better get some information on the water situation in south Georgia. Harry's going to need a lot of help to get the message across to the voters when they call a referendum on the countywide water system this fall."

Tears sprang up like green fountains in her eyes and she stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"You'll have to be patient at first, of course," he continued, unabashed. "If I start wearing bush shirts and carrying a machete in the backyard, you'll have to pretend it's perfectly normal."

THEY SPENT their wedding night in a luxurious motel on a Florida beach, McCabe having coaxed Ed back home early for the occasion of their wedding.

She lay in his arms on the balcony and watched the whitecaps hit the moonlit beach.

She smiled as his mouth found hers in the dim light. He lifted her up and tugged her back into the room, pausing to turn down the double bed. He pulled off his clothes while she gaped at him, chuckling when he was through and she was still frozen in position.

He came close, removing her blouse and the rest of her outfit until she felt the cool ocean breeze on her bareness with an incredible sense of freedom.

She caught her breath on a wild, husky little moan as she felt for the first time in her life the silky roughness of a man's bare flesh against every inch of her own.

"McCabe," she moaned.

"You need to learn some new words," he whispered in her ear as his hands made new, exciting discoveries about her. "Before morning, you'll have a great vocabulary."

He was a patient lover. And he knew where to touch, how to arouse. She found herself obeying his soft, tender whispers without a single protest as he led her deeper and deeper into a morass of sensuality that surpassed even her wild imaginings. She went with him every step of the way, his willing companion in a journey of exploration that ended all too soon.

She nestled close in his arms, still shaking with mingled pleasure.

"Oh, McCabe, I love you so much. I'm just so glad that you're not going to be risking your life anymore."

"That goes double for me, darling," he said flatly. "I wouldn't want to live if I had to do it without you."

She caught her breath at the genuine emotion in his deep voice.

"I love you, Wynn."

She let him pull her down into the maelstrom with him. He was hers. And she was his. Totally.

A long time later, they ordered coffee and pie from room service and sat together on the balcony.

"McCabe, about your job," she began uneasily. "Will you be able to settle for what Redvale can offer?"

"I've thought about that a lot," he said. "And I think I can, Wynn. As long as you don't mind traveling with me once in a while. I want to climb the ruins at Machu Picchu and on Crete and see the pyramids. I'd like to go around the world without being obligated to report what I see. Would you like that?"

"Yes, I would," she said.

He kissed her nose. "Will you miss reporting a lot?"

"No more than you will, I guess," she admitted.

"Wynn, Ed made me a proposition," he said after a minute. "He offered me the paper."

She sat up, holding her breath. "And?"

He studied her. "How would you like to run it with me?"

"Oh, McCabe!" she burst out, laughing, loving him. "McCabe, what a nice wedding present!"

He drew her close and kissed her. "I'm still working on the roomful of roses." He eased her back down into his arms. "Now, this is how I thought we'd start out," he began. And she nuzzled closer as she listened. She lifted her hand to his face, and her wedding ring caught the moonlight. It was no more radiant than Wynn's eyes, with the glow of fulfillment blazing softly in its depths.






GINNA GRAY

Golden Illusion



Claire Andrews was determined not to be a figurehead senator. She fought to show Matt Drummond that she was cool and capable, but soon she couldn't hide the explosive passion only he aroused.



He knew the instant Claire Andrews arrived. One moment the restaurant hummed with the sounds of laughter and quiet voices; the next, a hush spread over the room.

Matt Drummond leaned back in his chair with easy nonchalance. His lean, rugged face set in impassive lines, he lifted a glass of neat bourbon to his lips. Over its rim, keen blue eyes made a sweeping study of the other diners.

The Markham was a favorite gathering place for Washington, D.C.'s, upper echelon. Its elegant dining room was filled to capacity with the usual Friday-night crowd. It never failed to astound Matt that even here, in this sophisticated, celebrity-sated city, Claire Andrews could create a stir by simply walking into a room.

Finally, his eyes settled on the slender, blond woman and two things struck him as he watched Claire approach. The first was her incredible, delicate beauty. The second was the fact that, as always, she left him cold.

Not surprisingly, she was perfectly groomed; he had never seen her any other way. Her golden blond hair was swept back into an intricate chignon, high on the back of her head. It emphasized the classic beauty of her features and the smooth perfection of her creamy skin. Her makeup was understated. Around her neck a single diamond teardrop hung from a fine gold chain. Matching stones glittered on her earlobes. The black silk gown that clung to her slender curves was elegantly simple, expensive, and, of course, in perfect taste.

That, Matt suspected, was part of the reason he had never been stirred by Claire's beauty. Everything about her was too perfect.

Matt's gaze switched to his table companion. Senator Jackson Timms lazed in his chair, a slight smile on his face as he, too, watched the reactions of their fellow diners.

"Well? Any more questions?" Timms said.

"About her popularity? No. Hell, Jack, we both know if this country were to switch to a monarchy, Claire Andrews would be crowned queen tomorrow."

Both men rose when Claire reached the table. The maitre d' summoned a waiter to take her drink order.

"Claire, my dear, I'm so happy you could make it." Senator Timms smiled genially as he placed a fatherly kiss on her cheek. "As you can see I've asked Matt to join us. There's a little matter we'd like to discuss with you." He stepped aside to pull out her chair. "But we'll get to all that later. Now then, what would you like to drink, my dear?"

"White wine, please," Claire replied, smiling.

While the senator gave the order to a waiter, calm gray eyes turned toward Matt. "Hello, Mr. Drummond. It's nice to see you again."

"Mrs. Andrews."

Matt met her steady gaze. She had not known he would be there, yet she showed no surprise. Did anything *ever* shake that rigid composure?

"How have you been, Claire?" Senator Timms inquired. "And how is your lovely daughter? We haven't seen much of you two this past year."

"I'm fine, Jack. And Joanna seems to be adjusting," Claire replied. "She took her father's death very hard, but this past fall she began her first year at William and Mary and I think that's helped."

The senator murmured a few consoling words, then deftly changed the subject.

While they engaged in small talk, Matt sat back and observed. Up close, Claire's beauty was even more striking. Her bone structure was a work of art. Admittedly, there were a few fine lines around her eyes, but somehow they added to her appeal. At thirty-nine, Claire was a stunning woman.

This would be the first time Matt had ever spent an entire evening in her company. For years they had been running into each other at Washington social functions. They would always nod, exchange a few polite words, then promptly go their separate ways, with a great deal of relief on his part.

It wasn't that he actually disliked her, but Claire's sheer perfection and unflappable poise grated on his nerves.

Of course, he realized that these very qualities had made Claire eminently suited to her role as the wife of a powerful United States senator, a man expected to follow in his father-in-law's footsteps as the next leader of their party.

Claire's entire life had been spent on the periphery of the political arena, and she knew the drill as well as anyone. As a political asset she was unsurpassed. During campaigns and public functions she had always been highly visible—the dutiful, supportive wife, standing by her husband's side, charming the constituency. And when her presence was no longer needed, she had seemed to fade obligingly into the woodwork. To Matt, that made her seem unreal and shallow, like a windup doll you occasionally take out and play with, then store away.

Perhaps that explained why Joseph Andrews had indulged in a string of discreet affairs, he mused. In the bedroom a man needed a flesh-and-blood woman, not a public image.

The meal passed pleasantly enough, yet Claire displayed not the least curios-

ity about the true reason for the meeting, and that annoyed Matt intensely.

Over after-dinner coffee Senator Timms leaned back in his chair and fixed Claire with a direct look, which she met unwaveringly. He smiled and began.

"Claire, my dear, how would you feel about running for your late husband's senate seat?"

Amazing, Matt thought grimly, as he watched Claire absorb the question. Except for an infinitesimal widening of her eyes, her expression remained the same. Calm.

"Actually, I've never given it a thought. Why?" she asked.

"Because I think you'd make an excellent senator. You're bright, you're well liked, and you know the game. And I believe you can win. The party needs you, Claire. We can't afford to lose that seat."

"Aren't you leaving out your own personal reason for wanting me to run?" Claire smiled knowingly, and her gray velvet eyes held a shrewd twinkle. "We both know it won't hurt your image within the party to back a candidate who is not only the daughter of K. L. Thornton, but also the widow of Joseph Andrews. The power struggle between you and Senator Marsdon is no secret. It's been going on since my father's death."

Matt had to struggle to hide his amusement. It was obvious that Jack hadn't expected her to see through his scheme or to expose it quite so boldly. Whatever else she was, Claire wasn't stupid.

Jack recovered quickly. "I won't deny that I stand to gain a great deal, but the party *does* need you, Claire."

She nodded, then turned to Matt. "And you, Mr. Drummond? What's your stake in this?"

Matt met her steady gaze. "As you know, my family has always supported the party. We have nothing against the candidate put forward by Marsdon's

faction, but we're not all that confident he can win."

"And you think I can?"

"Probably."

"But you have doubts."

"About your vote-drawing power, no. About your suitability, yes. There's a great deal of difference between being a senator's wife and actually holding office."

"That's quite true," she conceded in an infuriatingly agreeable tone. "But tell me, Mr. Drummond, with qualms about supporting me, why are you here at all?"

"I've asked Matt to be your campaign manager," Senator Timms inserted quickly. "He hasn't accepted yet, but I'm sure we can clear up any doubts he might have, if you'll just let him ask you a few questions on the issues, that sort of thing." He smiled. "You *are* still keeping abreast of the issues, aren't you?"

Claire shrugged. "Old habits are hard to break."

"There you are, then. Fire away, Matt."

A raised hand stemmed the questions before they could begin. "No, I don't think so," Claire stated firmly. "When and if I decide to run, Mr. Drummond may ask me anything he wishes. But I have to think about this, Jack. It's too important a decision to make impulsively. And I'm not at all sure I want to get back into that world."

Matt frowned. He had expected, if not unrestrained enthusiasm, at least a show of interest. Yet she was so damned cool!

"Frankly, Mrs. Andrews, I'm surprised by your hesitation. I would think you'd jump at the opportunity. After all, just imagine how proud your father would be if he were alive," Matt drawled.

The gray eyes snared him once again. "If you really believe that, Mr. Drummond, then you didn't know my father. K.L. was a chauvinist. He didn't approve of women holding office."

"Yet he supported the women's movement," Matt shot back.

A slow smile curved her mouth. "Of course. Half the nation's voters are women. K.L. was no fool."

Surprise rippled through Matt. He had never known Claire to be even remotely critical of her father.

"Claire, I realize we've sprung this on you rather suddenly, but just don't take too much time over it, my dear," Timms urged. "This is January. Only a few weeks are left to file for the primary in Texas."

By the time they had collected their coats, the doorman had flagged down a taxi. About to climb in, Claire hesitated, then turned and said, "Why don't you both come to my house for brunch, about eleven on Sunday. I'll give you my decision then. If I decide to run, and if I decide that Mr. Drummond should handle my campaign, we'll talk issues then. Good night, gentlemen."

Matt could not have been more astounded if she had hit him. It had not occurred to him that she might not want him as her manager. For God's sake! The woman knew his family controlled one of the largest newspaper empires in the country! That was the kind of backing political hopefuls dreamed about!

It was only when Jack Timms slapped him on the back that Matt realized he was still gaping at the receding taillights of Claire's taxi.

"Don't worry about it," the older man said with a chuckle. "You and Claire are going to make a fantastic team."

The two men walked slowly down the street to a black sedan. Senator Timms stopped and inserted his key into the door lock. "Can I give you a lift?"

Matt grimaced. "No, thanks. I don't live far from here. Besides, I need the walk. It'll give me a chance to cool down."

He tried to force his thoughts away from Claire, but in his mind's eye he kept seeing those steady gray eyes, dismissing him. *Him!*

Matt prided himself on being a realist. False modesty was a waste of time. He knew full well the position he held in the behind-the-scenes power structure of Washington. By some he was regarded with awe, by others with grudging respect and dread. And his success had not been due entirely to being a member of the wealthy and powerful Drummond clan. True, for over five generations his family had been active in Washington politics, but Matt had made his own mark. It was now generally conceded that having Matt Drummond in your corner was a definite plus. No one knew that better than Claire Andrews.

Claire had been the darling of the American public since the first time her father had dandled her on his knee on the floor of the Senate when she was only six months old. Thanks to the news media, the country had watched Claire grow into an angelic little girl, then into a lovely young woman. When, at twenty, she married the up-and-coming young Senator Andrews and almost a year later gave birth to a daughter, everyone had been ecstatic.

A year ago her love affair with the press and public reached an emotional peak when her father and husband were killed together in the crash of their light plane. Through the medium of television, the entire country had watched as a grieving but dignified Claire went through the ordeal of a double funeral.

Matt frowned in concentration. The timing couldn't be better, he knew. Since the tragedy Claire had kept a low profile. She had been photographed only three times in the past year, twice attending church and once last fall when she had enrolled Joanna in college. Now the public was hungry for news of her.

When he reached his apartment building Matt paused with his hand on the entrance door. Snowflakes fluttered softly down, settling like tiny feathers on his black hair, blending in perfectly with the silver strands at his temples.

Matt liked snow. It reminded him of the happy times he'd spent with his family at his Virginia farm. They had all met there just a few weeks ago for Christmas. With both his brother and sister married and raising families, Matt had found himself knee-deep in nieces and nephews. And he'd loved every minute of it.

He sighed regretfully. There'd be precious little time for snowball fights and tramping in the woods for the next three months. He still had misgivings, of course. In addition to feeling a mild contempt for Claire, he wasn't sure he trusted Jack Timms. But come Sunday, he was going to that brunch.

CLAIRE SHUT the door of her Georgetown home and leaned against it with a sigh. Her heart was still thumping madly. It had been all she could do to conceal her shock when Jack Timms had asked that startling question. Ever since, her emotions had been in turmoil.

"Mother? Mother, is that you?"

Joanna's voice scattered Claire's thoughts and she opened her eyes wide in surprise, then started toward the dimly lit living room.

"Yes, it's me, Joanna."

"Where have you been? Honestly! You nag and nag me about never spending any time with you, and when I do come home you're out running around."

The petulance in her daughter's voice made Claire's spirits plummet. Surely by now there should be something more between mother and daughter than this constant sniping and bickering.

Claire forced a smile to her lips and stepped into the living room.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived, darling. Had I known you were planning to come home this weekend I wouldn't have gone out." The smile stayed in place as Claire met Joanna's sullen look. She was her father's daughter in every way possible. They shared the same rich brown hair, the same hazel

eyes, the same arresting, aristocratic features. The same character.

Whenever Joseph had been in the wrong, he had always quieted the stirrings of his conscience by finding fault with Claire, dredging up some imaginary grievance or slight. Joanna did the same.

"If you're trying to say I should check in with you every time I want to make a move, forget it!" Joanna snapped. "I'm eighteen, not eight."

Be patient, Claire counseled herself. She's still suffering from her father's death and she's just striking out in anger. Claire tried again.

"I realize that," she said softly. "And that wasn't what I meant. In any case, I'm glad you're home. I've missed you." Her smile was sadly loving, her voice gentle.

"Well, I can't stay long. I just came to get some money," she said defiantly.

"What happened to your allowance?"

"I've already spent it."

The temptation to give in was strong but Claire fought it. "Then I'm sorry. You'll just have to wait for your monthly check," she said calmly. "We agreed that you would live within your allowance. It's more than generous."

Joanna leapt out of her chair. Her face was rigid with fury. "Why are you so stingy? It's not as though you don't have the money! Daddy and Gramps left you filthy rich! You just want to make my life miserable!"

"That's not true, Joanna." Claire strove to hold on to her own anger. "We've been over this again and again. We made an agreement, and you're going to stick to it. Somehow, you've got to face the fact that the world does not revolve around your wants."

"If Daddy were alive he'd let me have the money!" Joanna hurled the accusation at her.

No doubt, Claire thought wearily. There were times when she had the un-

easy feeling that Joanna resented her for being alive.

Claire stared at her daughter for a long, strained moment. Where had she gone wrong? How had she lost her? Tears stung her eyes but she blinked them back. She had learned long ago to conceal her pain and protect her vulnerable inner core. "Please. Do you think we could stop all this tearing each other to pieces? For once couldn't we just discuss something calmly?"

"Are you going to give me the money?"

"No."

"Then we have nothing to discuss."

Sighing, Claire sank down into one of the elegant winged-back chairs. "I do have something else I'd like to discuss with you."

"Oh, great. What is it now?"

Exasperation rippled through Claire in a great wave. "I had dinner tonight with Jack Timms and Matt Drummond. Senator Timms asked me to run for your father's senate seat."

Stunned silence followed the softly voiced announcement. Then Joanna bounced to her feet in a burst of excitement, her expression one of pure joy. "Oh, Mother! That's wonderful! Perfect!" She flung her arms around Claire's neck. "I'm so happy I could... I could kiss Senator Timms!"

Her reaction shocked Claire. Then, unable to help herself, she hesitantly returned the hug.

"Darling, I had no idea you'd feel this way." Claire gave a weak laugh. "I was worried about even telling you. I was afraid you'd be angry."

Joanna looked into Claire's face. Her eyes were sparkling. "Oh, no! This is marvelous! And you're sure to win. With your image, how could you miss?" She gave Claire a radiant smile and headed for the door. "If I don't tell somebody the good news soon I'm going to burst. I'm going upstairs and call Grandma and Grandpa Andrews. Just think, when you

win that election there'll be another Andrews in the Senate. No one will ever forget Dad as long as you're there."

And then she was gone, not even aware of the pain her careless words had left behind.

Stricken, Claire stared at the empty doorway. So that was it. Her life was to be a living memorial to Joseph. No "How do you feel about it, Mother? Do you want to run? Will this make you happy?"

Claire rose and walked across the richly patterned Oriental rug to the French doors overlooking the elegant little garden at the back of the house.

It was snowing heavily now, and Claire watched it drift into the corners and slowly fill the clay pots lining the flagstone terrace. So what are you going to do now, Claire? she asked herself silently. Do you want to continue on as you are, doing nothing? Claire thought of the loneliness of the past year, the aimlessness. No. No, not that.

Then what? A job? She laughed shortly at the absurdity of that thought. Who on earth would hire her? And to do what? All she knew was politics.

Which brought her back to Jack Timms's suggestion.

A deep sigh punctuated her thoughts as she recalled the campaign trails she had covered with K.L. and Joseph. Political life was grueling, demanding. Did she really want to get back into it? At least a career in politics would give her a chance to prove her worth and to be accepted as an individual. A need K.L. had never understood.

Her eyes darted toward the stairs. It had been over a year since she had seen Joanna that radiantly happy. A melting warmth spread through Claire as she thought of the impulsive hug her daughter had given her. It was the first time in years that Joanna had shown her any affection.

Did it really matter *why* Joanna wanted her to run for Joseph's senate seat, if it brought them closer?

No. No, of course not.

*

"EXCUSE ME, Mrs. Andrews, but you asked me to tell you when it was ten o'clock so that you would have plenty of time to dress before the gentlemen arrive."

Claire looked up at her housekeeper and smiled. "Thank you, Nora." She slipped her feet into the blue satin slippers lying in front of the sofa, then stood up and stretched sensuously. "It's time I stopped anyway, before I get a permanent kink in my spine. I can always finish the rest of the papers later."

"If you ask me, you read too much. All those world crises and political intrigue first thing every morning! Why, it's enough to boggle the mind."

Grimacing wryly, Claire scooped up the unread papers and started toward the door. Reading the political news and world affairs had been a prebreakfast ritual for her since she was eight years old. Her father had insisted upon it.

Just under an hour later Claire was ready. The dignified *senatorial candidate*. She gave her attire one last, hurried inspection. The burgundy wool dress with its long fitted sleeves and softly draped neckline was a study in understated elegance. With it she wore a delicate silver necklace and small silver and amethyst earrings. Her shoes were dove-gray suede pumps.

"You'll do," she said jauntily, trying her best to ignore the nervous flutter in her stomach.

The doorbell rang just as Claire reached the bottom of the stairs. "I'll get it, Nora," she called.

"Oh! Mr. Drummond!" The surprise she felt at finding him on her doorstep was evident. Though she had instructed Nora to set a place for him, she had been

certain he would not come. "Please, come in."

His eyes glittered with mocking amusement as he moved past her. In the close confines of the entryway he seemed to tower over her, and for the first time she was acutely conscious of how large he was. Joseph had always seemed tall to her at five-eleven, but Matt topped that by a good two or three inches, and his heavy overcoat added bulk to broad shoulders and a powerful frame. The sharp, cold freshness of the outdoors radiated from him. Mingled with it was the elusive fragrance of some spicy masculine cologne. Claire was suddenly uncomfortable, aware of Matt Drummond as a rugged, virile male in his prime.

"You were expecting me, weren't you, Mrs. Andrews?" he asked in a silky, guileless tone.

Claire's chin rose. "Actually, no," she replied. "I fully expected Jack to arrive with some plausible excuse why you couldn't make it."

"You mean because of your little put-down the other night?"

Claire's head tilted to one side. "Did I hurt your feelings, Mr. Drummond?"

Matt shrugged out of the coat and handed it to her. "I'll admit to being surprised. And, quite frankly, mad as hell. But hurt? No. My skin is thicker than that. Anyway, I like women who have a little gumption."

Claire's heart jerked oddly, then took off at a mad gallop when he added softly, "By the way, you look very lovely this morning."

She smiled formally. "Thank you. Now, if you'll come this way we'll—"

The pealing of the doorbell cut her off, and to her intense relief, it was Senator Timms.

During the first course of chilled fruit compote, the conversation was general, if a little guarded. However, Nora had no sooner served the eggs Benedict and retreated into the kitchen than Jack Timms

turned to Claire. "Well, my dear, have you reached a decision?"

Taking a deep breath, Claire met his expectant look. "Yes, I have. I've decided to run," she replied simply.

"Great! That's wonderful news!" He stopped abruptly and slid an uneasy glance toward Matt. Then he turned back to Claire. "I, ah, assume you've reached a decision about Matt also," he tacked on.

"Actually, no. I haven't." Claire turned her attention to the quietly brooding man on her left. "I don't doubt your ability or knowledge, Mr. Drummond. But I have doubts about our working together. I realize that you regard me with a certain amount of... antipathy."

For just a few seconds Matt looked surprised, as though it had never occurred to him that she had noticed. My goodness, he really does think I'm just a piece of brainless fluff, Claire thought.

"Antipathy is too strong a word, I think." Matt took a sip of water, then pushed the glass aside. His fingers drummed on the table. "In any case, I never let personal feelings interfere with my judgment. My reservations are based solely on principle. I like to feel that a candidate is at least moderately capable before I commit myself."

He was right, of course. By working to get her elected, he would be putting his own reputation on the line. She wasn't thrilled with the idea of being cross-examined by this hard, unfriendly man, but fair was fair.

With an air of having reached a decision, Claire picked up her knife and fork. "Very well, Mr. Drummond. When we've finished our meal I'll be happy to answer your questions."

AS MINUTES stretched into hours and hours into late afternoon, Matt's voice became more clipped with every question. His face sobered and hardened with concentration. For some reason known

only to him, he had not wanted to admit that Claire had the intelligence or the ability to handle the job, but she had won him over. She could see it in his eyes. He might not ever like her, but at least he now accepted that she had a brain and knew how to use it.

But if she had gained Matt Drummond's respect, Claire had to admit the feeling was entirely mutual. His questions were sharp and penetrating, and right on target.

When the session finally came to an end, Matt leaned back and stared at her through narrowed eyes. "I must say, I'm impressed. Your grasp of both the overall situation and the specifics is excellent."

Senator Timms sat forward, his face alight. "Well! Now that's settled, why don't we get down to the real business of planning this campaign?"

"You seem to have forgotten something, Jack," Matt drawled. "Mrs. Andrews hasn't yet agreed to have me direct her campaign."

Claire met his demanding gaze. His blue eyes issued a direct challenge. She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, then closed it again. Indecision gnawed at her, but there was no doubt in her mind that with Matt's help she could win the primary. She'd be a fool to reject him.

Claire took a deep breath, pinned a smile on her face, and extended her hand. "It looks as though I have myself a campaign manager."

TWO WEEKS LATER, when Claire arrived in Houston, she had not only a campaign manager but a staff and a fully equipped headquarters as well. The space Matt had acquired in one of the centrally located hotels consisted of several small offices, which they and other key staff members would occupy, and one huge room filled with desks, file cabinets and worktables, where the volunteers would work. In the coming months they would be stuffing envelopes for bulk

mailings, canvassing potential voters by phone and answering the dozens of calls that would come in daily.

As Matt introduced Claire to her staff, she was aware of being sized up, and found wanting, she feared, by two staff members: Sean Fleming, the bold-eyed and even bolder-mannered young man who was to be her press secretary; and Eric Draper, who, according to Matt, was the best speech writer around, despite his painful shyness. It was nothing specific, just an aura of faint distrust that radiated from them. Their attitudes puzzled Claire, but she hadn't time to ponder the cause as Matt turned her attention to the others.

"This is Betty McBride, who will act as your secretary as well as girl Friday to anyone who needs help, and Thelma Rotowsky, whose duties include recruiting volunteers and generally running the office."

Claire smiled and shook their hands. Betty was in her mid to late twenties, short and plump, with long, straight brown hair and an enthusiastic personality. Thelma was a tall, rawboned woman in her sixties whose stern face revealed experience and an iron-willed determination. Claire took an immediate liking to both.

The fifth and last person, Harvey Pendergast, was the only one with whom Claire was already acquainted. He had been one of her father's aides for many years and she knew he was a dedicated worker, yet his inclusion made her uneasy. She hadn't thought him the type Matt would hire.

When the greetings were exchanged, Matt ushered Claire into her office. She had no sooner seated herself than he tossed a file folder on her desk.

"That's the announcement speech you'll be giving at your four o'clock press conference." He glanced at his watch. "That doesn't give you much time, so I'll leave you alone to look it over. Be ready

in thirty minutes," he advised as he strode out.

Claire wasted five of those precious minutes regaining her equilibrium. As she stared at the closed door she realized that she had half expected there to be some slight thawing in their relationship now that they were working together. Matt's brusque, impersonal manner had quickly put an end to that notion.

Feeling strangely hurt and rejected, Claire opened the file folder and picked up the typed pages. "Well, if that's the way he wants it, so be it," she told herself firmly.

When Claire stepped up onto the dais to face the blinding glare of flashbulbs, her insides were churning, but her calm facade held. Taking her time, she let her eyes roam over the crowd, then fixed her gaze at a point in the middle distance and smiled.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for coming."

With only a slight huskiness betraying her nervous tension, Claire plunged right into the speech. Five minutes later, when she had finished, there was a short pause; then a babble of voices erupted as a dozen different questions were thrown at her at once.

The period that followed was an ordeal, but Claire was well prepared for the political questions. It was when the inquiries became more personal that she had difficulty.

"Tell me, Mrs. Andrews, do you have any plans to marry again?" one journalist demanded.

Claire looked at her with cool dislike and uttered a clipped, "No," then turned away. "Next question."

"Is it true that you and your daughter do not get along?" the woman asked in a smirking tone.

"My relationship with my daughter is none of your business."

"Then what about your relationship with Matt Drummond?" she asked.

Stepping up beside her, Matt leaned into the microphones. "I'll answer that, Janice," he said. "I am Mrs. Andrews's campaign manager. Period. Any speculation beyond that is just plain ludicrous."

Hours later, Claire lay wide awake, staring at the bedroom ceiling in her Houston apartment, trying to fathom the cause of the dull ache in her chest. What was the matter with her? Why did she feel so teary, so...confused? More than once since Matt had uttered that blunt statement, her feelings had swung the full arc between anger and gratitude.

Why this strange ambivalence?

Pride, most likely, she told herself disgustingly. She didn't want him to be attracted to her. And she certainly didn't want any emotional involvement with Matt. Yet it bruised her ego to realize that he was no more enamored of her than she was of him—especially when he made his feelings so plain. And in public, at that!

A small, self-deprecating laugh escaped Claire's lips. "Ah, woman, thy name is vanity," she whispered into the darkness.

UNDER MATT'S direction, the campaign moved swiftly into high gear, and Claire's life became a confusing montage of luncheons, fund-raising dinners, late-night strategy sessions, speaking engagements and press conferences. The exhausting eighteen-hour days seemed to run together, with very little sleep in between to distinguish one from the other.

It was Matt's plan to make at least three sweeps through the state before the election, the first of which started only a few days after Claire announced her candidacy. For two weeks they hopped from town to town, sometimes eating breakfast in one, lunch in another and dinner in still another. The pace was grueling.

Her first morning back, she had no sooner entered campaign headquarters than Thelma Rotowsky stopped her.

"Morning, Claire. I'd like you to take a look at this contribution that came in while you were on the road."

Accepting the check, Claire glanced at it idly, her eyes widening when she noted the amount. Then she frowned. "Span Mar Industries? Isn't that the company under federal investigation?"

"That's the one."

"I see." Claire handed it back. "Return it with a polite note saying thanks, but at present we don't need further contributions. I think they'll get the message."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Thelma replied dryly.

Claire found her desk littered with a two-week accumulation of phone messages and press clippings. After returning the most urgent of the calls, Claire picked up the top clipping from the stack and began to read.

When she had finished, she leaned back in her chair, but her eyes darted again and again to the newspaper clipping. Her mouth compressed with annoyance, and a look of determination entered the dove-gray eyes.

Rising, she crossed the small office and opened the door. "Betty, would you ask Matt to come in here, please?"

The young woman looked up. "Sure thing."

With a rueful smile pulling at her lips, Claire walked to her desk and sat down in the leather chair.

There was a sharp rap on the door, then Matt stepped inside.

"Betty said you wanted to see me, Claire."

Her heart gave a queer little jerk. Sometime during the past two weeks, fifteen years of formality had been abandoned and they were now on a first-name basis. Claire wasn't used to it yet.

"Yes, I do." She frowned. "Actually, I'd like to speak to Sean and Eric also."

Matt gave her a long look, then, shrugging, turned and bellowed, "Fleming! Draper! Come in here, will you!"

Once again Claire had the strong impression that these two young men did not altogether approve of her. Along with Matt, they had accompanied her on the tour of the state, but their cool wall of reserve had remained firmly in place.

Claire looked from one to the other, then came straight to the point. "I think, before we go any further, it's time for me to make something very clear to all of you. In the future I intend to have the final say over any and all information that is released to the public from this office."

Matt exploded. "What the hell do you mean?" he demanded angrily. "What's the point of hiring a press secretary and speech writer if you're going to tell them what to say?"

"I don't intend to tell them what to say, Matt, merely see that the views and policies expressed are my own. And I also intend to put an end to this sort of publicity." Leaning forward, Claire tapped the offending press clipping. "This is only a two-column article, yet it contains fourteen references to either K.L. or Joseph. I will not trade on their reputations. Is that clear?"

Claire's insides were quivering as she leaned back in her chair and met Matt's black scowl, but her face remained serenely calm.

The anger slowly left Matt's face, and he stared at her for a long moment, his expression thoughtful. "Very well. If that's the way you want it." His gaze went to the other two men. "Any questions?"

"This order about press releases? Does it apply to all of them? Even if the source is Harvey Pendergast?"

Claire frowned. "Has Harvey given you some information to use in a press release?"

"Yes. In fact, he insisted upon it. I've got it right here," Sean replied, drawing several folded pages from his pocket.

Claire's expression tightened as she quickly scanned them. It was a scurri-

lous account of an incident in which her opponent, Will Kiley, had been involved. Though it contained a brief statement to the effect that the charges against him had later been dismissed, it was written so as to leave the reader with grave doubts. It was, in short, the very lowest form of muckraking.

Looking up, Claire met Matt's inquisitive gaze and silently handed him the papers. When he had finished reading, he demanded, "Are you going to okay this?"

"No."

"Harvey's not going to like that," Sean drawled lazily, but his black eyes had begun to sparkle.

"I really don't care what Harvey likes. We are not using that garbage."

"Okay, Claire. You're the boss." Smiling, he headed for the door. Eric was one step behind him.

"Was that for their benefit?" Matt asked, the moment they were alone.

"What are you talking about?"

"Surely you've realized that those two have doubts about working for you. They're both worried that you are a disciple of your father's brand of politics." Matt angrily flung the offending article onto her desk. "You know damned well K.L. wouldn't have been squeamish about releasing that charming little bit of information to the press."

Claire's brows rose sharply. So that was it. They were afraid she was like her father. Judging from Matt's expression, he obviously shared their opinion. Blue eyes probed her face, suspicion glittering in their azure depths.

"You *do* realize you haven't heard the last of this, don't you?" he asked.

As if on cue, her door was thrust open and Harvey stormed in. Eric and Sean filled the doorway just behind him. The veins on Harvey's temples stood out alarmingly, and angry color suffused his wrinkled face.

"Would somebody tell me just what the hell is going on here?" he de-

manded. "Fleming tells me you're not going to use that information on Kiley."

"That's right, Harvey. I'm not. Either I win on my own merits, or I don't win at all."

"My God! I don't believe I'm hearing this! And from K.L.'s own daughter!" Harvey rolled his eyes, then leaned forward and placed both hands on her desk. "This is politics, Claire, not some parlor game. The object is to win." He swung toward Matt, giving him a beseeching look. "Can't you make her see reason? She's throwing away a golden opportunity, all for some idealistic nonsense!"

Matt shrugged. "Sorry. The lady's calling the plays. I just execute them."

Frustration etched Harvey's features. For a moment he seemed unable to speak or move. Then, muttering a string of profanity, he spun on his heel and out the door.

The two young men exchanged triumphant looks, which quickly stretched into broad grins. Sean eyed Claire, his expression a mixture of surprise and admiration. Claire returned the probing look steadily, and after a moment he lowered one lid in a broad wink, gave a thumbs-up signal, then quietly closed the door.

Claire sighed and slumped back in her chair. Feeling Matt's eyes on her, she turned and met his hard stare.

"That kind of thing, digging up dirt on people, is Harvey's specialty," Matt stated in a harsh tone. "If you weren't intending to use it, why did you insist that I take him on?"

Surprise widened Claire's eyes. "I didn't ask you to hire him! I didn't even know you had until I arrived!"

Matt's eyes sharpened as he read the blank confusion in her face. "I see. Well now, that's very interesting. Jack Timms led me to believe that you especially wanted Harvey on your team. I wonder why?"

But before she could speculate, Matt was at the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned. "Oh, by the way. You

handled that very cleverly. You certainly convinced Sean and Eric of your integrity."

But not you, Claire thought. During the past two weeks one thing had become very clear: Matt was determined not to like her.

Claire managed to treat Matt with cool, businesslike neutrality over the next few weeks. His own politely distant attitude aided her efforts. So did her busy schedule. Then, one morning in late February, he burst into her office unannounced, and in a flaming rage.

"Great going, Claire! Terrific! I work my tail off to get your campaign off to a good start, and you blow it all by playing footsie with a married man!"

Claire's mouth fell open. For a moment she was incapable of speech. "What in heaven's name are you talking about?" she demanded.

In a sudden, violent move, Matt slammed a newspaper down on the desk with such force it cracked like a rifle shot.

Eyes round, hand pressed to her neck, Claire stared at him in utter shock. Then she saw the newspaper and her eyes grew even wider. Her hoarsely whispered "Oh...my...God" came out of its own accord.

Claire stared at the grainy but completely recognizable photo of herself and Congressman Phillip Bonner, realizing that it had been taken the night before she left Washington for Texas. They had just emerged from the restaurant, and Phillip had leaned over and given her a quick good-luck kiss. It was all perfectly innocent, but caught at that precise moment, it looked anything but.

"Well, don't just stand there! Say something!"

Looking up, Claire met the harsh anger in Matt's face. She spread her hands in a helpless gesture. "It's not what you think, Matt. Phillip had just taken me out to dinner to celebrate the start of my political career. That's all. It was perfectly innocent. After all, Joseph and I

were close friends with Marjorie and Phillip Bonner for years."

"If that's the case, why don't I see Mrs. Bonner in that picture?"

"Because at the last minute she developed a migraine headache and couldn't make it."

"Which, of course, explains the tender kiss."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Claire snapped. "That was a good-luck kiss between friends."

Matt leaned forward and growled in a menacing tone, "Oh, I see. You may believe that. And maybe even Congressman Bonner believes it, but I doubt seriously that his wife does."

Claire glared at Matt. "What makes you say that? Marjorie is a close friend. She knows there's nothing between Phillip and me."

"Oh, really? Then suppose you tell me why Mrs. Bonner has gone into seclusion in her Austin home and refuses to speak to reporters?"

Stung into action, Claire jerked open the bottom drawer of the desk and withdrew her purse. "I've got to see Marjorie, talk to her," she muttered.

"You can't do that, Claire," Matt said. "You have that luncheon at twelve-thirty with the Home Builders Association."

Claire's face set mutinously. "Then instead of wasting time arguing, I suggest you call the airport and have Joe crank up that damned plane you're so fond of. Because *I'm going to Austin*. If we hurry I just may make it back in time for that luncheon."

*

WHEN THE BONNERS' housekeeper showed them into the living room, Marjorie was standing by the glass doors overlooking the rose garden, her back to them. She neither turned nor spoke.

Claire started toward her. "Marjorie, dear, I'm so sorry about—" she began,

only to stop dead. Marjorie's face was hard and cold with dislike.

"What are you doing here, Claire? Haven't you done enough already?"

Claire's eyes went wide. "Marjorie! Surely you don't believe that outrageous article?"

"And why wouldn't I believe it? My husband takes a beautiful widow out for a cozy dinner and afterward is photographed giving her a tender kiss. Only a fool would ignore such evidence."

"Bu-but you knew about that dinner," Claire stammered.

"No, I didn't know Phillip was going to take you out. Believe me, if I had, I would have been there. Because, you see, I've always known that my husband married me on the rebound, that it was you he really loved."

"Marjorie! What are you saying?" Claire gasped. "Phillip was Joseph's best friend!"

The other woman threw her head back and laughed bitterly. "Phillip hated Joseph's guts. But in order to be close to you, he deliberately cultivated his friendship. I went along with it because I had no choice. Anyway, I figured it was better to keep my opponent in sight."

"Oh, Marge," Claire breathed sadly, her face stricken. "We're not opponents. We're friends."

"Friends? *Friends?*" Marjorie spat the word out. "We've never been friends. Never!"

Claire sucked in a painful breath and swayed on her feet. The words hit her like a spray of bullets. She wasn't even aware of Matt's steady arm sliding around her waist. This was a nightmare. It had to be.

"Is this really necessary, Mrs. Bonner?" Matt began, but Marjorie cut him off, her voice becoming shrill.

"Oh, yes. It's necessary. I don't intend to stand calmly by while she takes my husband from me. All her life Claire's had it easy. She's beautiful, she's rich. All she ever had to do was crook her little

finger and she was given whatever her heart desired."

Unconsciously, Claire sagged against the solid support of Matt's body. Her face wore a haunted expression. "I don't want Phillip, Marge. I never have. You have nothing to fear from me." She closed her eyes, unable to look at the woman she had called friend for so long.

"Mrs. Bonner, regardless of your feelings toward Claire, the important thing now is to put an end to these rumors," Matt interjected firmly. "I suggest you issue a statement corroborating her story that you were absent from that dinner because of illness, and that the Bonners and the Andrews are and always have been close friends."

Angry defiance flared in Marjorie's eyes. Then, finally, she expelled a long, angry sigh. "All right. I'll issue a statement... provided Claire agrees to stay away from Phillip."

During the ride back to the airport, Claire huddled against the door and stared out the side window. There was a tight, burning knot just beneath her breastbone. The hot sting of tears threatened but she held her eyes wide, her face rigidly composed. Only the fleeting quiver in her chin betrayed the pain that tore at her.

Why was it impossible for anyone to love her? As a female, she had been to K.L. a bitter disappointment, which he had shrewdly turned into a political asset. To Joseph she had been a means to an end, an inside track to K.L.'s power and influence. To Joanna... Claire truly didn't know.

One of the few simple, straightforward relationships she had ever enjoyed had been her friendship with Marjorie, and now she was forced to accept that even that had been a sham. How could she have been so blind for so long? Not once had she even suspected Marjorie's true feelings. Or Phillip's.

"You know, Claire," Matt said suddenly, to break the silence, "Marjorie

was very upset. I don't think she really meant all those things she said. Well, I guess it's understandable, if you feel you're losing your husband to someone who's always had everything she's ever wanted."

Claire's head swiveled sharply, and Matt was struck by the wounded look in her soft gray eyes.

"Do you *really* believe that? That I've been given everything I ever wanted?"

Taken aback by the question and her incredulous tone, he returned his attention to the road. "Sure. After all, it's true. You can hardly deny it."

"Oh, shut up, Drummond!" Claire snapped, then promptly burst into tears.

Astonishment jerked Matt's head around. At the sight of her pathetically huddled form, he swung the car onto the grass verge and switched off the engine. Acting purely on instinct, he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

"Hush, now, hush," Matt pleaded urgently. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Honestly I didn't. Come on, don't cry like that. You'll make yourself sick."

His fingers massaged her neck gently as he cradled her head in the curve of his shoulder. He could feel her tears soaking through his shirt, the racking sobs shuddering through her.

You stupid, insensitive fool, he berated himself silently. You should have known how upset she was. You should have been understanding and sympathetic. Instead you just *had* to get in another nasty little dig, didn't you? Wonderful!

Finally, he could stand it no longer. Cupping a hand beneath Claire's chin, Matt lifted her face up. Copious tears still streamed down her face from beneath long, spiky lashes.

Unable to help himself, Matt lowered his head and brushed her lips with his in the barest whisper of a kiss. "Don't cry, Claire." He kissed the corner of her mouth, his tongue darting out to catch the puddle of tears that had gathered

there. "Please don't cry. I'm sorry. I know it hurts. But you'll get over it. You'll see," he whispered, lowering his head.

Slowly, tenderly, his mouth moved over her face, bestowing soft kisses on her cheeks, her temples, her forehead, each closed eyelid. Her skin was soft and smooth beneath his lips. With every breath, he inhaled the sweet, delicate fragrance of her hair, her skin. Unconsciously his arms tightened around her.

Again his mouth sought hers, only this time, though still gentle, the kiss was surer, more definite. Slowly, with infinite care, he sought to ease her pain with mobile lips, with stroking tongue, with caressing hands. But gradually, feeling her soft parted lips tremble beneath his, the desire to comfort was replaced by desire of a much more basic nature, and the kiss subtly altered.

Behind the tenderness there was now a sweet, sensual hunger that demanded appeasement. With heart-stopping sureness his tongue became a seductive marauder, tenderly plundering the intimate recesses of her mouth. The caressing hands became bold and possessive, molding and shaping her pliant body against his hard, masculine length. Claire burrowed closer. Her submissive moan filled Matt with an exquisite feeling that was very close to pain, and his body throbbed hotly with a desire that was stronger, more urgent than any he had ever known.

The nerve-jangling blast of a horn brought them back to reality with shocking suddenness. Matt's head jerked back, and a pained grimace flickered across his face as he once more became aware of their surroundings. What the hell was he doing, making love to Claire on the side of a busy highway?

Quickly, he lifted her out of his lap and back to her side of the seat. Without looking in her direction, he switched on the engine and pulled back onto the highway.

"I hope you're feeling better now," he said into the tense silence, wincing at the coldness of his tone.

"I...I... Yes, I'm fine," Claire quavered.

Matt knew he should say more, but he couldn't find the words. How the hell was he supposed to explain what had just happened? He couldn't believe he'd kissed Claire. *Claire Andrews*, of all people! He must be going mad! Either that, or this job was getting to him.

THE NEXT MORNING Claire sailed into campaign headquarters with her head held high. She was wearing a soft wool, teal blue dress that gave her skin a pearly glow and emphasized her slender curves. If anyone had suggested that she had worn the dress as a confidence builder, Claire would have told them they were crazy. Why should she be nervous about facing Matt? Just because he had kissed her like that?

Determined not to give the matter undue importance and ignoring the persistent flutter in the pit of her stomach, Claire smiled her way through the throng of workers in the outer room and greeted Betty and Thelma with her usual composure. That composure slipped a bit a short time later, however, when Matt walked into her office.

Smiling crookedly, he folded his arms and propped a shoulder against the wall. "I see, we're back to the 'public Claire' this morning," he observed in a mad-deni- ingly calm tone.

Claire felt all her firm resolve crumble into a little heap of dust, and she reacted to the buzzing intercom like a drowning man reaching for a lifeline. "Yes, Betty?"

"Senator Timms is here to see you," she replied.

Claire was torn between relief at having the unnerving scene with Matt interrupted and apprehension about Jack Timms's unexpected visit. She hadn't the vaguest idea why he had come.

His affectionate, fatherly greeting did not fool Claire for a moment. Senator Jackson Timms was the consummate politician. Claire watched the two men exchange greetings, wondering what was behind that hearty, jovial manner.

When they were seated, Claire smiled. "It's good to see you again, Jack, but I'm surprised. Houston isn't exactly your stomping ground."

"You're right. But I've been hearing some disturbing reports lately and I thought I'd better check them out."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, I understand that you refused to make use of a piece of...shall we say...very incriminating evidence against your opponent." He smiled tolerantly. "That wasn't smart, Claire."

Harvey. That was why Jack had wanted him to have a position on her staff. Harvey was reporting to Jack.

"I don't deal in muck, Jack. So you can tell Harvey he needn't bother digging up any more."

He shook his head. "All right, Claire. We'll forget about Kiley. You have him beat in the polls anyway. But this business about Span Mar Industries, I can't dismiss so easily. They claim you refused their contribution."

"That's right. I did."

Matt looked at her sharply. "When?"

"About a month ago. Right after our first tour."

"I really think you should reconsider that decision, my dear," Senator Timms advised pleasantly.

"Jack, Span Mar is under investigation for suspected fraudulent practices. Until that is cleared up I don't want to have anything to do with them."

"But that's just the point. With your help, and the help of some others in Washington, they can get clear of this little mess. And you will have gained a powerful ally in the process. It's called reciprocity." He stared at her with eyes as hard as pebbles. "I'm afraid I must in-

sist that you accept the Span Mar contribution."

Hot anger gushed up in Claire, but she managed to hold it in check. Cocking her head to one side, she lifted her brows. "Tell me, Jack. When you asked me to run for office, did you really expect to get a puppet senator?"

"I expected proper appreciation for my support!" he snapped.

"And if I don't show the, ah, proper appreciation? What will you do?"

"I've lined up quite a bit of backing for you, Claire, both financial and otherwise. A few words in the right ears and that backing, all of it, will be withdrawn."

"I see."

Opening a drawer, Claire removed a black leatherbound book and laid it on the desk. She settled back in her chair and studied the senator through half-closed eyes. "You know, Jack, you remind me a lot of my father," she observed.

He swelled visibly, taking her words as the ultimate compliment.

"K.L. was also very good at getting people to do what he wanted. Of course," she mused, "K.L. had that little 'dirt book' to keep people in line."

The senator's eyes jumped to the book on her desk.

"You know, rumor has it that K.L. had the goods on everyone who was anyone in Washington. Whenever he met opposition he couldn't overcome any other way, K.L. just trotted out his little book." She watched him impassively.

"Are you trying to blackmail me, young lady?" the senator spluttered.

"Why, Senator," Claire replied. "How could I possibly blackmail you?"

For the first time, she looked directly at the book that lay between them. Then her direct gray gaze locked with the senator's.

Claire noted the fine sheen of perspiration on his upper lip, the nervous bob

of his Adam's apple as he swallowed repeatedly.

Matt sat perfectly still, his narrowed eyes flicking back and forth between the two silent combatants.

Finally, Senator Timms released his pent-up breath. He darted a quick look at Matt, and his mouth twisted with self-mockery. "I told you there was more to this woman than met the eye. Unfortunately, even I didn't know how much."

Standing, he gave her a conciliatory smile and extended his hand. Claire took it without hesitation. "Forgive me, Claire. We all have to test our muscle now and then. No hard feelings?"

"Of course not, Jack."

"Good, good." He winked and gave her arm a fatherly pat, shrugging off the tense confrontation. "I wish you the best of luck in May. When you get back to Washington, look me up."

For a moment after the door closed behind him, Claire stood motionless, staring at it. She felt drained. With a sigh, she turned and walked to the window.

"Lady, when push comes to shove, you really know how to handle yourself. I'm impressed."

She gave Matt a long, steady look over her shoulder. Suddenly Claire recalled that it was Jack Timms who had picked Matt to be her campaign manager. Where did his loyalties lie? The question had to be resolved.

"I want to ask you something, Matt, and I want a straight answer. Did you accept this post because you hoped to put another yes-man in Jack's pocket?"

She knew instantly she had angered him. The blue flame in his eyes sent a shudder of relief through her before he even spoke.

"I accepted because I thought you were the best candidate," he ground out tautly. "Period."

A weak smile trembled on her lips. "I'm sorry if you feel insulted, but I had to know. Because I won't be manipu-

lated anymore. Not by Jack. Not by anyone."

Matt's hard stare sliced into her. Then his face softened. "Okay, Claire. I can understand that. Just remember, though, I'm on your side."

He started for the door, then stopped. His eyes narrowed on the book on her desk. "Just for the record... would you have used that?"

"This? Why, I use this every day," she said, straightfaced. "It's my appointment book."

Pure stupefaction froze Matt's features and for a full ten seconds he stood as though turned to stone, staring. Then, suddenly, he threw back his head and let the deep, rumbling laughter roll from his throat. It was too infectious to resist, but Claire didn't even try.

It was several minutes before either regained control, but at last, weak with laughter, Claire sank into her chair.

"Oh, sweetheart, you're priceless," Matt choked. "Remind me never, ever, to play poker with you." Placing his hands flat on the desk top, his eyes still dancing, he shook his head. "Now, tell me. Is there *really* a dirt book?"

Claire gave him a wounded look, then grinned. "I haven't the slightest idea," she admitted pertly.

Matt turned and headed for the door. "Priceless. Absolutely priceless," he said, chuckling and shaking his head.

"Matt?" Nervously, Claire wet her lips. "Matt, you *do* know that even if I had the book I wouldn't use it, don't you?"

Her heart did a little flip as she watched the slow grin spread over his face. "Yes. I know," he said softly.

When the door clicked shut behind him, Claire sighed. She didn't question the fragile joy his answer had given her. She just accepted it. Gratefully.

★

THAT EVENING, Claire had almost finished dressing, when the doorbell rang. She had just buckled on a strappy, cranberry-red evening sandal. Before she could get the other one on, the bell rang again. She stumped across the room and down the hall to the front door.

"You guys are a little early, aren't..."

Expecting to see Eric and Sean, Claire gaped in astonishment at Matt's black-clad form.

He was leaning indolently against the doorframe. Dressed in an impeccably cut tuxedo and a pristine white ruffled-front shirt, he was, quite simply, devastating. Claire swallowed hard, scanning the crisp black hair and ruggedly handsome face. Then her gaze lowered to the astonishing breadth of shoulders and chest, the lean middle and narrow hips, all the way down to the mirror-polished surface of his black leather shoes.

"Do I pass inspection?"

The teasing question brought her head up, but his expression did nothing to calm her chaotic emotions. "What are you doing here? Oh! I'm sorry, I mean... where are Sean and Eric?" Good Lord! She hadn't felt so tongue-tied since she was sixteen.

"I came to take you to the Comptons' party." A slow smile spread over Matt's face and he nodded toward the red sandal dangling from her fingers. "Don't you think you'd better ask me in so you can put that thing on?"

"Oh! Yes, of course. Please come in." Stepping back, she motioned him inside. "Won't you sit down? I'll just be a second," she said, perching on the edge of a chair to buckle on the dainty sandal. When finished, she looked up to find Matt staring at her nylon-clad legs, exposed by the side slit in the long, straight gown. Despite her best effort, Claire could not prevent the blush that ran up under her skin.

Flustered, she nervously adjusted the thin straps that supported the gown's fitted bodice. "I don't understand. When I left headquarters, Sean and Eric were planning to pick me up as usual. What happened?"

"The three of us put our heads together and decided it would be best if I escorted you from now on."

Claire stared at him. "Why?"

"Today in Lucille Smith's column there was another of those little 'tidbits' raising questions about you and Phillip Bonner. The best way to put an end to that kind of thing is to give the press another, juicier bone to chew on."

"What do you mean...exactly?" Claire asked.

"Just that if you appear to be interested in another man—an eligible, acceptable man—they'll soon forget all about Bonner."

"And you are going to be that man?"

Matt grinned. "Since Sean and Eric are too young, I seem to be the logical choice."

"I see."

An icy hauteur settled over Claire, chasing away the fluttering sensation Matt's arrival had created. She rose with slow dignity. "I appreciate your concern and your offer, but I really don't think that type of charade will be necessary."

Matt stood up too, his lazy smile changing to a tight-lipped scowl. "We all have to make sacrifices in a political campaign. And this is the best solution to the problem. Now, get your things and let's go. We don't want to be late."

Claire glared at him, an angry retort on the tip of her tongue, but the smoldering flame in his eyes warned her not to give it voice. Finally, without a word, she left the room.

"Damn it to hell." The softly voiced curse rolled off Matt's tongue. *You clumsy idiot, you couldn't have bungled that worse if you'd tried.*

Turning from the empty doorway, he walked to the fireplace and propped one

arm on the mantel. Matt shook his head wryly. It's a good thing you didn't go into the diplomatic corps, Drummond. You would have had this country into World War III in six months flat.

"I'm ready."

Matt looked up to find Claire framed in the doorway. Her beautiful, creamy shoulders were now covered by a long-sleeved sequined jacket that exactly matched her cranberry-red gown, and in her hand she carried a small silver clutch bag. Her expression was cold, remote.

Patience, Drummond. Patience.

TWO HOURS LATER, standing in the plush ballroom of the Comptons' River Oaks mansion, Claire was wishing she could leave. But that was a foolish hope. Ben Compton, a wealthy independent oil operator, was a staunch supporter of Claire's party, and his wife, Elaine, was one of Houston's leading society matrons. Claire pretended to listen to her endless supply of small talk. Inside she was seething.

How dare Matt cook up this disgusting little scheme without even consulting her? Did he honestly think he was doing her a favor? She'd had enough of counterfeited feelings to last her a lifetime. First K.L. had *pretended* to be her adoring father. Then Joseph had *pretended* to be her loving, faithful husband. She had no desire to enter into another phony relationship. Especially not with Matt!

"Here you are, Claire. White wine, chilled."

Claire looked up as Matt came to a halt beside her. Accepting the glass with a cool smile, she turned politely back to their hostess, then stiffened as she felt a large hand settle warmly against the small of her back. She tried to ease away but Matt merely slipped his hand farther around her waist and pulled her even closer to his side.

A blond woman in her late forties, wearing a floating, pink chiffon dress, insinuated herself into the group. Her

catlike green eyes settled on Claire, her knowing look more pronounced as she noted Matt's encircling arm.

"Tell me, Claire dear, has your life changed much since you became a candidate for the Senate?" Lucille Smith couched the seemingly innocent question in a guileless tone.

Claire had learned over the years to be very cautious when dealing with Lucille Smith. The woman's syndicated gossip column appeared daily in most major newspapers. Whatever Claire said could, and probably would, end up in print the next day. Especially if Lucille could twist it to suit her own purpose. "Not really. Campaigning is nothing new to me, as I'm sure you know."

"Oh, but it must be so much more exciting now that you are the candidate. Now *you* are the one all those fascinating, powerful men are courting," the older woman gushed. She smiled slyly. "And I'd be willing to bet, now that you're single, that you probably have to beat them off with a stick."

Claire drew in a sharp breath, but before she could reply, Matt pulled her closer. The fingers pressing into her waist warned her to remain quiet.

"I'm afraid you'd lose your bet, Lucille," he said smoothly. "You see, I'm always on hand to make sure Claire isn't bothered by that sort of thing." The look he slanted Claire was heavy with possessiveness. Everything about him proclaimed proprietary rights in a way that was unmistakable.

Lucille's shrewd green eyes didn't miss a single nuance. The avid curiosity in her face made Claire's heart lurch. After suffering through several more probing questions, Claire gladly accepted Matt's invitation to dance.

But the moment he took her into his arms her anger returned full force. Mingled with it was a growing sense of panic. He held her close, and the touch of his body sent a tingling sensation through Claire. She tried to push against his

shoulder and put more space between them, but Matt merely brought her tightly against him and settled his cheek against her temple.

"Matt, will you stop this? I told you I don't want any part of this farce." The words Claire had intended to be forceful came out in a breathless little whisper. Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer.

"Mmm, just relax and enjoy the dancing," he murmured. "We'll discuss the rest later."

Briefly, she wondered how she could possibly relax with her nose pressed against the side of his neck. The intoxicating male scent of him was making her senses swim.

Finally, Claire quit even trying to resist. Instead, she gave in to the need his closeness aroused, and melted against him. For a few moments all that existed for her was the warm imprint of his body. So lost was she in a world of pure sensation that it took her several minutes to realize that the music was now a distant sound in the background. She opened her eyes and frowned. They were in the deserted entrance hall, partially concealed by a graceful free-standing staircase.

When Matt's arms loosened, she looked up at him in drowsy confusion. Then her heart skipped a beat. His blue eyes were aflame with a desire that seemed to melt any resistance that remained. She stood perfectly still, mesmerized, as he bent his head to claim her lips.

The kiss was a slow, drugging seduction. Warm and moist, his lips moved over hers with an insistent, tender demand, devouring the trembling softness they sought to conquer. His tongue slipped between her slightly parted lips, then, meeting no resistance, plunged boldly into the warm sweetness of her mouth.

A delicious shudder shook Claire and her arms curled around Matt's neck to hold him close. She returned the kiss fervently. A soft whimper of pleasure es-

caped her throat when his roaming hands trailed down her spine to cup her rounded bottom and pull her tightly against his gently undulating hips.

The fevered kiss ended slowly, reluctantly, their lips clinging in heated passion until at last the need for air pulled them apart. Claire's breathing was ragged and Matt's was no better. He cupped her cheek and looked at her intently.

Claire swallowed hard. "Why... why did you do that?"

A lopsided smile tilted Matt's mouth. "Why do you think?" he asked in a voice like warm velvet.

Suddenly, over his shoulder, Claire caught a glimpse of swirling pink chiffon as a figure moved swiftly back into the Comptons' ballroom. Claire stiffened.

"Of course, how stupid of me," she clipped in cold sarcasm. "I should have realized the whole thing was for Lucille's benefit." Claire stepped back out of his arms. "Next time don't bother. Election or no election, I don't intend to put on a show for anyone." With that, she turned and walked back into the crowded ballroom.

Years of practice at hiding her feelings helped Claire get through the remainder of the evening. Later, when Matt sought her out and suggested they leave, she even managed to act as though nothing were amiss.

Once in the car, however, she lapsed into an icy silence. It wasn't until they stopped outside Claire's door twenty minutes later that it was broken.

"Thank you for taking me to the party, but from now on please assign that duty to someone else," she said stiffly.

"Claire, may I come in for a minute? I want to talk to you." Matt smiled coaxingly.

"It's late, and I'm tired. Besides, I really don't see what else we have to talk about."

A heavy sigh lifted Matt's chest. "Very well, we'll do it this way then."

Too late, Claire realized his intent. Before she could move, his hands had closed over her shoulders and pulled her close. Any protest was cut off as his mouth closed over hers. Then his arms were sliding around her to mold her pliant form against his unyielding strength. Claire was helpless to defy the gentle command of his seeking mouth and probing tongue, and with a soft sigh, she parted her lips. Staking his claim, Matt deepened the kiss. Eyes closed, unable to fight the burgeoning desire his touch evoked, Claire clung to him and returned the kiss with growing ardor.

The intimate embrace went on and on until, very slowly, Matt's hands slid up over her back to grasp her shoulders. With gentle pressure, he eased her slightly away. "Look around you, Claire," he commanded. "What do you see?"

Blinking rapidly, she obeyed without thinking. "N-nothing," she stammered in confusion.

"Exactly. There's no one else here. No reporters, no gossip columnists. Just you and me, babe."

Cupping a hand under her chin, Matt lifted her face and dropped a soft kiss on her parted lips. He raised his head only inches and looked straight into her eyes. "Think about that," he whispered. Then, after another quick kiss, he was striding toward the elevator.

WHAT WAS Matt up to? Claire lifted a stack of clean lingerie from the drawer, then halted. She shook her head. How many times had she asked herself that question over the last week? And she was no closer to an answer now than she had been the night he had kissed her senseless in front of her door.

As always, when she thought of that kiss her heart began an erratic flutter. And he acted as though nothing had happened.

Though he continued to escort her to every political and social function, he was a model of propriety, never doing or

saying anything for which she could fault him.

Claire reached for the sweater that lay beside the suitcase and began to fold it. Still, she mused thoughtfully, that kiss and the cryptic statement that had followed seemed to indicate that he *was* interested in her as a woman. Didn't it?

She reached for a blouse, then straightened up and stared at the half-packed suitcase. Why had Matt insisted that she take a break from campaigning and spend the weekend with him and his family at their Virginia farm? And why was she going? What did his family think about it? Oh God! Why was she so jittery?

Smoothing a hand nervously over the soft wool material covering her hips, Claire wondered again if the moss green sweater and matching slacks were appropriate. Were they too dressy? Too casual? She simply didn't know. She'd never been on a farm in her life.

The peal of the doorbell interrupted her inspection and Claire spun around, eyes wide.

"Hi. All set?" Matt asked when she opened the door.

"Uh, yes. I'll, uh, just get my bags."

"Show me where they are. I'll get them for you," Matt offered, falling in step beside her.

Claire gave him a faint smile, then quickly looked away. God! Why was she so nervous?

"I like your hair that way," he murmured huskily, eyeing the cascading gold with warm male appreciation.

Claire's heart fluttered so wildly it threatened to suffocate her. This was ridiculous! Without really thinking, she blurted out the thought that had been gnawing at her all day. "Matt, I really don't think I should go. You told me yourself that you haven't seen your family in months. I'm sure they would like to have you all to themselves."

"Nonsense." Smiling, he walked toward her slowly. "Besides, they're ex-

pecting you. If I don't bring you now, my mother and sister will have my head."

A crooked finger beneath her chin forced her head up. His face was serious, his blue eyes compelling as he studied her. "Trust me, Claire. You'll enjoy it."

IT WAS VERY LATE when their plane landed at the small private airport in Virginia. The Drummonds had left a car in the parking lot for them. After instructing Joe, the pilot, to meet them back there at five Sunday afternoon, Matt assisted Claire into the station wagon and climbed behind the wheel. Less than twenty minutes later they came to a large, rambling farmhouse about a mile off the main road.

The glow from the windows showed only a few lights burning, but no sooner had they stepped inside than an elderly couple appeared.

The woman rushed forward with her arms outstretched. "Matt, darling. It's so good to see you again." She sighed happily as she stood on tiptoe to engulf him in an exuberant, motherly hug.

Ellen Drummond was a tall, slender woman in her early sixties. Short silver hair fluffed attractively around a fine lined face that even now bore traces of great beauty. Vivid blue eyes, very much like Matt's, twinkled behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

Matt's father's hair was iron gray and his rough-hewn face bore a few more deep lines and creases, but there was no missing the resemblance between father and son. Age had stooped his broad shoulders slightly, but Daniel still stood eye to eye with Matt.

As though suddenly remembering her presence, Matt returned to Claire's side and drew her forward. Some of Claire's nervousness dissipated, for the warmth and sincerity in Dan and Ellen Drummond's welcome was unmistakable.

"Well now," Ellen announced briskly, "as much as I'd like to get to know Claire

better, we'd best save all that for tomorrow. It's very late. All the others went to bed hours ago. And you two have had a long trip. Matt, why don't you show Claire to the blue guest room?"

BREAKFAST WAS served in the huge country kitchen. It was here, also, that Claire met the rest of Matt's family. By sheer number they were a bit overwhelming, but she didn't mind.

The Drummonds' other son, Robert, was a few years younger than Matt and held a responsible position in the family's vast newspaper empire. He and his wife, Sandy, a petite, quiet blonde, lived on the West Coast with their four children. There was only a slight resemblance between the two brothers; however, their personalities were quite similar. Each was strong, dominant, and had a steel-hard core of determination.

Their sister, Beverly Foster, was a beautiful, dark-haired young woman in her early thirties, and the image of Ellen, but Claire suspected that she possessed a personality as forceful as that of her brothers. Edward Foster was a prominent pediatrician in New Orleans. In addition to five-year-old Caroline and nine-month-old Steven, the Fosters had an eight-year-old son named Mike.

The elder Drummonds, Claire learned, now resided in Florida, but with the family scattered to the four winds, they tried to have these get-togethers several times a year.

Conversation flowed freely, along with a great deal of good-natured teasing and laughter. A mixture of pleasure and longing filled Claire as she enjoyed the warmth and coziness of the room and the affectionate bantering of a close-knit family. Bitterly she recalled the stiff, formal meals she had shared with her father as she was growing up.

When the meal was finished, Matt's suggestion that he show Claire around the farm was met with opposition.

"You'll do no such thing," Ellen informed him. "Your sister and I want a chance to get to know Claire. Anyway, I promised Ben that you'd go over the farm accounts with him this morning." She smiled. "You see, my dear, this place belongs to Matt. His grandfather left it to him years ago, but he maintains that it's too big for a bachelor, so we just use it for family gatherings. Ben Winslow manages the place."

"Oh, I see," Claire said quietly.

Matt reached for a denim jacket hanging by the door. "Okay, I'll see Ben this morning. But I'm warning you, this afternoon Claire stays with me. I didn't bring her here to have you two women monopolize her."

"What *did* you bring her for, brother dear?" Bev sang out coyly.

Matt speared her with a hard look, but as his eyes slid to Claire, a slow, seductive grin curved his mouth. "If I weren't sure it would embarrass the lady, I'd tell you... sister dear," he returned.

The knowing hoots and low whistles that followed Matt out the back door completely shattered Claire's composure, bringing scalding color to her cheeks.

"Aaahhh, another Drummond bites the dust." Robert sighed dramatically. "The last holdout in the family, Matt, confirmed bachelor, devil with the ladies and joy of every D.C. hostess, has finally been hit by Cupid's arrow," he lamented. Then he turned to Claire and grinned. "Not that I blame him, mind you. I'd grab you for myself if he hadn't seen you first," he said, earning himself a sharp poke in the ribs from Sandy and a round of riotous laughter from the others.

Claire stared at him, aghast, but her stunned expression only seemed to heighten their amusement. Damn Matt! What the devil did he mean, making a statement like that, then walking out? "No, no. You don't understand," she

insisted. "There's nothing like that between us."

"Oh, no! Who are you trying to kid?" Bev hooted. "We've been reading all those items in the paper."

"But that was Matt's idea."

"Oh, I'll just bet it was Matt's idea," Bev snickered.

"All right, now. That's enough," Ellen intervened. Claire sent her a grateful smile, but her relief at having found an ally disappeared when Ellen added, "If Claire wants to keep her relationship with Matt strictly private, that's her business. We'll hear all about it soon, I expect."

Claire simply stared. She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, then closed it again. Matt's family had already put their own interpretation on his behavior, and who knew, perhaps they were right. The thought lit a flare of hope deep inside her.

THE MOMENT lunch was over, Matt grabbed Claire's hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, we're going on that tour I promised you." He paused only long enough to take two coats from the rack.

Outside, Claire hugged a slightly large fleece-lined garment to her, buttoning it up to her chin.

"Would you like to walk or ride?" Matt inquired.

Claire gave him a dubious look. "By ride, do you mean as in four-wheeled, motorized vehicle, or—" she shot a glance toward the stable "—as in giddyup horsey?"

Matt roared with laughter. "Actually, I meant the giddyup variety, but something tells me your answer would be no."

"That's right. I don't ride."

"What? A Texas girl who doesn't ride?"

"That's right. Silly of me, I know, but I have this inborn fear of anything bigger than I am."

Chuckling softly, Matt laced his fingers through hers. When they came to a small, bubbling creek, they followed it

upstream. A thousand unanswered questions hung in the air between them.

Suddenly Matt began to walk faster, pulling her along with him. "Come on. We'll never cover this whole place in one afternoon, but if we climb that hill you can see most of it. The view from the top is fantastic."

Raising her face to the weak spring sunshine, Claire smiled. She had never been so happy in her life. The problems of her real world slipped away. Here there was no senate race, no prying news media, no doting public. There was just the two of them.

Matt smiled down at her and squeezed her hand tightly. There was no need for words.

When they reached the summit of the hill, he flung an arm casually across her shoulders and tucked her against the side of his body.

"See that church spire over there? That marks the southeast corner of the farm." His arm swung in an arc encompassing gentle rolling hills and valleys. There was pride in his voice.

Tucked securely into the curve of his body, Claire tilted her head back and allowed her eyes to roam over his ruggedly handsome features, loving his strong jaw, the aggressive but sensual mouth, the chiseled leanness of his cheekbones. Everything about him pleased her, pulled on her senses like a powerful magnet. Why hadn't she seen it, felt it, before? Why had it taken so long?

Sensing her scrutiny, Matt looked down into her upturned face. Their eyes held fast, as with agonizing slowness, Matt bent to take her mouth in a gentle, heart-stopping kiss.

Claire's eyes fluttered shut. Helplessly, unashamedly, her lips clung to his as the soft, searing kiss drew to an end. Matt gazed into her eyes. "Do you know what I'd like to do?" he asked in a rough whisper.

Claire shook her head. "No. What?"

"I'd like to strip that beautiful body and make love to you," he growled. "Right here. Right now."

Her heart lurched to a stop, then took off at a gallop. Incapable of making a sound, Claire merely stared back at him, her gray eyes huge with longing.

Matt sighed heavily, grimacing. "But I can't. The ground is hard and cold. Not exactly the most comfortable or romantic conditions in the world."

"No," Claire agreed, not sure if she was glad or disappointed. She loved him and desired him, but there were still too many doubts.

After wandering around for an hour or so longer, they started back toward the house, but as they passed the barn Matt pulled her inside. "Come here, there's something I want to show you," he said excitedly, and led her over to a closed stall where a huge chestnut mare stood motionless, watching them.

"Look. Over there," Matt murmured. "Isn't he a beauty?"

In the corner, on a pile of sweet-smelling straw, was a newborn colt. He lay perfectly still, feet tucked under his body, eyes like liquid velvet.

"Oh, Matt, he's adorable," she breathed.

"He was born last night, just before we arrived."

The chestnut mare whickered softly at her offspring. When he made no move to obey, she turned and nudged his flanks.

Wobbling precariously, the tiny colt lifted his hindquarters up and, after a brief struggle, gained a semi-secure footing, tottered over to his mother, and began to nurse.

The moment was so poignant that Claire's throat closed and tears stung her eyes. Emotions long held in check came surging to the surface, overwhelming her. Before she even realized what she was doing, she blurted out, "Matt, why did you bring me to the farm this week-end?"

Matt eyed her curiously. "Not to seduce you, if that's what you're thinking. Not under my mother's watchful eye."

"Then why?" she persisted.

Matt hesitated. "Because..." He shrugged. "Because I wanted you to experience a loving family firsthand, I guess. I thought you'd enjoy it."

Claire's heart plunged like a stone. She took a step backward and stared at him, her face stricken. "You feel *sorry* for me!" She couldn't remember ever being so angry, but she didn't care. She was hurting and instinctively lashed out. It was the only way to keep the pain from consuming her.

"Well, let me tell you something, Matt Drummond," she continued heatedly. "I don't *need* your pity! And I have no intention of becoming one of your women!"

"Claire, you don't understand," Matt began, but Claire bolted for the door. She had almost made it when a muscular arm hooked around her waist and brought her to a jarring halt.

"Dammit, Claire! Will you stop it!" Matt shouted.

But Claire was too upset to listen. She fought desperately to dislodge his hold. Kicking and hitting, she lashed out in blind fury.

Matt held on grimly, until he was caught off guard by a sharp jab in the diaphragm. Off balance, he staggered backward but his hold on Claire did not break and she found herself tumbling to the floor with him.

The whole world seemed to spin as they rolled across the floor. Claire found herself pinned flat on her back on the straw-covered floor of an empty stall.

Furiously, she shoved at Matt's shoulders.

"Let me go!" Claire hissed.

"No! Not until you've listened to what I have to say," Matt snarled back, equally furious.

Claire set her mouth in a mutinous line and glared.

"First. I'm not asking you to be *one* of my women. I haven't made love to another woman since the night Jack Timms and I asked you to run for the Senate. And second. I don't pity you. I feel a lot of things for you, Claire, but pity isn't one of them. I wanted you to meet my family, get to know them, and for them to get to know you. I wanted to see you in my home. Is that so terrible?"

Wordlessly, Claire shook her head, as Matt released her hands and framed her face with his palms. "I've never felt this way about a woman, Claire. Never." His voice dropped to a low, husky pitch. "At this point I can't make you any promises. It's too soon. But I do know that what I feel is strong and good, and I think you feel the same. You're sure as hell not indifferent to me. I intended to go slowly, but somehow, I can't seem to keep my hands off you." His eyes searched her face for some sign of her feelings. "What do you say we relax and enjoy the rest of the weekend, and just let things take their own course?"

"I... I'd like that," Claire whispered, her heart soaring.

Then they lay quietly, allowing tense muscles to slacken, hearts to slow to normal. For several minutes they remained still, gazing at each other tenderly while Matt stroked the hair at Claire's temples.

Suddenly they both became aware of the close fit of their bodies, the quiet, the remoteness of the barn. They stared at each other in the thick silence. The hunger they felt was a palpable thing, and Matt lowered his mouth to hers.

His lips were roughly insistent, and with a low moan of surrender, Claire wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to admit the sharp, deep penetration of his tongue.

A hand slid up under the bulky coat and found the buttons at the front of her blouse. Slipping inside, his fingers trailed over the soft skin at the top of her bra, barely touching, tormenting her before

curving possessively around the warm flesh.

His lips devoured hers, tasting, biting softly, his body pressing her deeper into the fragrant hay. Claire moaned and arched upward when his thumb brushed back and forth across the tip of her breast, bringing the sensitive bud to full arousal, achingly tight and tender. His tongue traced the contour of her lips, easing between them to move slowly, suggestively inside her mouth until she writhed beneath him to the same erotic rhythm.

"Daddy kisses Mommy like that sometimes," Matt's niece Caroline lisped from the doorway. "'Cept never in the hay."

Snatching his hand from beneath Claire's coat, Matt jerked his head up sharply and glared at the little girl over his shoulder. "Caroline, what the devil are you doing out here?" he demanded. "You know the barn is off-limits. Now you get back to the house."

"I just wanted to see the colt." She pouted.

"Your father or Gramps will show you the colt later."

"Why can't you show it to me?"

"I'm busy."

"Doing what?" she persisted.

Matt rolled his eyes. "I'm going to be busy tanning your hide if you don't get back to the house in the next three seconds," he ground out.

"Oh, okay! Don't show me your silly ole colt! See if I care!" She whirled around and took off for the house, brown curls bouncing.

"One of these days I'm going to strangle that child," he muttered into the side of Claire's neck.

Claire's shoulders began to shake. "Oh, Matt... you sh-should have seen your face," she sputtered. "You looked exactly like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar."

Matt tried to meet her twinkling gaze sternly, but his mouth began to twitch.

"All right, all right, it *was* funny. But—" he leaned closer "—it wouldn't have been if she had come in ten minutes later," he stated bluntly, and grinned as a deep flush rushed up Claire's face all the way to her hairline.

She peered up at him through her lashes and grinned. "Well, you really shouldn't be trying to seduce ladies in the barn, Mr. Drummond. I can see I'm going to have to be on guard around you."

"Don't worry," Matt groaned. "You're safe for the rest of the weekend. With Caroline around I intend to be on my best behavior."

AFTER DINNER that evening Claire sat on the living room sofa next to Matt, listening to the lively conversation with only one ear. The shrill of the telephone startled her, and she jumped.

Scowling, Matt rose and strode across the room to answer it.

"When the hell did this happen?" The rising anger in his voice made Claire sit up straighter, a feeling of unease gripping her.

"Dammit to hell!" Matt exploded. "He knew better than that! The bastard waited until we were out of town, hoping to push you into a corner." He paused and listened, then growled, "Hell, what other choice is there? You just notify Joe. And don't forget to send that schedule along." He slammed the receiver down and stood for a moment before turning to face Claire.

"Harvey Pendergast quit a couple of hours ago. He insisted that Sean release another of his charming little exposés to the press. When Sean refused, Harvey walked."

Claire was relieved that the news wasn't worse. "Well, I can't say I'm all that sorry."

"About losing Harvey, neither am I. But that leaves us without an advance man, and since he hadn't completed the arrangements for your final tour, I'll have to." Matt drew in a deep breath and gave

her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Claire, but we're going to have to cut our weekend short."

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AFTER LOCKING the door behind her, Claire turned and walked down the hall to her bedroom. She was tired. And she was missing Matt terribly.

She sat on the side of the bed and reached down to remove her shoes. Flopping back across the mattress, she stared at the plastered ceiling. Three days. He'd been gone only three days, and already she was sick with longing.

And it was becoming obvious. Claire closed her eyes and sighed. She could still see that devilish look on Sean's face when he had caught her wool-gathering. But if he had nearly driven her crazy with his sly teasing, at least he was not a gossip. None of the others in the office had even seemed aware that Matt was interested in her. Until that morning when the roses arrived.

Recalling that scene, Claire groaned. She had been busy at her desk, when an excited, flushed-faced Betty had rushed in with a long florist's box.

The lid stuck a bit, and when Claire finally pried it off to reveal the dewy-fresh red roses, a small white card fluttered to the floor.

"I'll get it!" Betty cried, pouncing on it. She stared at the boldly scrawled message with wide eyes. "Oh!" Her gaze flew to Claire, and she handed her the card.

Experiencing a strange mixture of dread and anticipation, Claire read, "I miss you. Matt."

Why had he sent her those roses? Didn't he know what kind of gossip he was letting her in for?

Wearily, Claire got up and undressed, then stepped into the shower.

The trouble was, she mused, turning her back into the spray, that since she and

Matt had parted on Sunday she'd had time for second thoughts.

It was not that she was afraid of loving and losing. What really frightened her was her own emotional blindness.

What did Matt want of her? Life had taught her that everyone wanted something. K.L. had. Joseph had. Even Joanna. She hated the suspicions and doubts. But though her heart longed for Matt, her mind urged caution. When Matt returned on Friday she was going to have to keep a tight rein on her emotions.

DEEP IN slumber, her mind at first refused to accept the sound. The soft chime rang again. With an irritated moan, Claire opened her eyes and tried drowsily to focus. It was one in the morning and someone was ringing the doorbell!

Throwing on her rose negligee, she raced from the room barefoot. Who could it be at this hour? Had something happened to Joanna?

By the time Claire reached the door her heart was pounding. She peered through the peephole into the dimly lit corridor and gasped.

With fumbling hands she released the lock and pulled the door open.

"Matt! What are you doing here?" she managed in a reedy whisper.

He stepped inside and stood staring down at her. "I'm sorry I got you out of bed, but I had to see you."

His air of grim determination when he headed for the living room added to her fright. Claire hurried after him. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The coat was tossed over the back of a chair. The tie quickly followed. Turning, Matt looked at her intently, then pulled her to him. His eyes roamed her face hungrily for a moment, a flame leaping in their blue depths as they settled on her lips. "Nothing," he growled against her mouth. "Not a damned thing... now."

He kissed her with a depth of feeling that took her breath away, tenderness and

longing, passion and wild driving need all revealed in the burning touch of his mouth, the urgent pressure of his encircling arms.

Slowly, ardently, his mouth moved back and forth over hers, stroking, caressing her lips with a hunger that brought forth an equal craving in Claire. His roaming hands molded her pliant form tightly to him, as though he could never get enough of her.

"Oh, Claire," Matt whispered roughly against her scented skin. "I couldn't wait until Friday to see you, to hold you." He strung a line of kisses from the base of her neck up to her ear and tenderly nipped the lobe. "I've got to have you, darling. I wanted to go slowly, but I can't wait any longer. I have to know that you're mine."

The raw emotion in his voice made Claire quiver in his arms, flushed with desire and weak with longing. She ached to give in, to share with him all the pleasure and sweetness a man and woman could give one another. But she was afraid.

Pushing against his chest, Claire pried a small space between them and looked up into his eyes, her own eyes troubled. "Matt, I...I'm not...sure I'm ready for this yet. I..." She stopped and looked down. She didn't want to ask, but she had to. "What do you want from me, Matt? What do you expect from this relationship?"

He looked at her tenderly, intently, his expression quite serious. "What do I want? I want you, Claire. All of you." His eyes swept over the wild mass of sleep-rumpled curls, and a smile hovered. "Right from the top of your golden head to the soles of your dainty bare feet. And that, my love, includes your heart." He tipped her head up farther.

"Listen to me, darling. I don't want K.L. Thornton's daughter, nor Joseph Andrews's widow, nor even the lovely, brilliant senatorial candidate. I want you.

Just you—the woman I know you are beneath that facade.”

Claire stared back at him, her eyes luminous pools of wonder and joy. He was saying exactly what she wanted to hear.

“Oh, Matt.” His name came out in a whisper, and with a soft sigh, she laid her cheek against his chest.

Matt swept her up in his arms and stood for a moment studying the lingering uncertainty in her face. “Claire, we can’t go back to the way we were before, and we can’t continue the way we are now. I’m a man, not a boy who can be satisfied with a few kisses.” He smiled into her eyes. “In fact, I think we’re both too old to be playing the ritual games of courtship. Since the first time I kissed you, we’ve both known where we were heading. Well, we’re there now, and either we take that next step now, tonight, or we call the whole thing off. The decision is yours.”

In his taut face Claire saw the need and the aching want that so exactly mirrored her own. Smiling softly, her eyes glowing, she lifted a hand to stroke his jaw. “Love me, Matt,” she whispered. “Love me.”

His arms tightened around her. Still devouring her with his eyes, he lifted her and strode down the hall.

In the bedroom, he placed her on her feet beside the bed and kissed her slowly, tenderly, while his hands eased the negligee from her shoulders, then smoothed over her back and hips in a sensuous glide, molding, pressing her soft curves into enticing contact with his hard, male length.

She could feel the trembling in his body and his aching arousal, and she returned the kiss with tender passion, her mouth and tongue playing with his as her fingers worked open his remaining shirt buttons.

A violent shudder rippled through him, and with a moan, he buried his face in Claire’s golden curls. “Oh, sweet-

heart, just the feel of you drives me crazy.”

Claire could hardly breathe at all. “I... I know.”

Matt pushed the thin straps of her nightgown down her shoulders and Claire gasped as he brought her back to him, her soft breasts flattened against his warm, hard-muscled torso. The tingling rasp of crisp chest hair against her sensitive nipples was a deliciously erotic feeling, and Claire strained closer.

Grasping her shoulders, Matt eased her away and for a moment merely stood looking at her.

“God, you’re lovely. Even more lovely than I imagined,” he choked in a ragged voice.

Reaching around her, he threw back the rumpled blanket, then lifted her in his arms and placed her gently on the bed. Within minutes he was beside her, his heated flesh pressing into her, scorching her.

His kiss was deep and penetrating, exploring each intimate corner of her mouth even as his hand traced the long, lush line of thigh and hip to the curve of her waist, then over her rib cage. His supple fingers traced the underside of her breast, then thumb and forefinger deftly teased the aroused nipple into hardened readiness, and Claire moaned, her body arching upward.

Matt nibbled his way downward over her neck and collarbone to the scented valley between her breasts. With a sigh of satisfaction, he cupped one soft mound with his palm and closed his mouth lovingly around the swollen bud.

“Oh, Matt!” Claire cried out in sweet agony, and in restless passion, her hands ran over his shoulders, his neck, down over the muscular chest, her fingers threading through the coarse hair that covered it, tugging gently.

Every touch, every kiss pulled emotions tighter and tighter. Their breathing was rapid, heavy, labored.

A soft whimper of pure pleasure escaped Claire when Matt's palm stroked downward over the silken skin of her belly. The whimper turned into a moan when searching fingers found the warm, moist core of her desire.

Lifting his head, Matt looked down at her with burning eyes, his face taut and flushed with passion. "Oh, Claire! I can't wait any longer!"

In silent invitation, Claire urged him to her, and Matt moved into position between her soft thighs. Lifting her hips, he entered her in a smooth, silken stroke, then lay perfectly still, savoring the moment of possession.

But desire too long repressed could not be held in check, and soon they moved together in a rhythm as old as the universe, as old as love.

At first their pace was slow and exquisitely sensual, but as the flame of desire rose higher, their movements became more rapid, more urgent. The delicious agony grew and grew, until Claire, clinging tightly to Matt's hard body, shuddered and cried, "Oh, Matt! Darling!"

A second later, as wave after wave of sweet ecstasy washed over her, Matt's own hoarse cry of completion sounded in her ear.

Utterly replete, they clung to each other, their breathing heavy, their bodies slick with perspiration. Claire let her mind drift somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. She felt boneless, content, deliciously sated.

At last, raising himself up on his forearms, Matt looked down into her drowsy face and smiled, then bent his head and kissed her slowly.

"Oh, lady, lady," he murmured against her lips. "You take my breath away."

It was still dark when Claire awoke to the sound of someone moving about quietly.

"Matt?" she called into the darkness.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Claire sat up and flicked on the lamp. Matt, already dressed, was putting on his shoes. Her heart squeezed at the sight of him. Lord, she loved him so. She glanced at the clock. "It's only a little after five. Where are you going?"

"I have to be in Corpus Christi by nine. I should have flown there last night." Matt sat down on the bed beside her, and drew her forward until their lips met. His mouth caressed hers with a soft, sweet pressure.

He pulled back and smiled. "Poor old Joe probably thinks I'm nuts. He's waiting for me at the airport, trying to grab a few hours' sleep in the pilots' lounge."

"I wish you didn't have to go."

"Not half as much as I do. But I have to finish setting up the arrangements for your next tour. If all goes well, I'll be back Friday night before the Garners' reception is over." He kissed her, hard. "I'll meet you there. Now you go back to sleep, sweetheart."

Claire snuggled down under the blanket, smiling as she heard the click of the front door. It wasn't until much later that she realized Matt had not once told her he loved her.

CLAIRE SPENT an hour mingling with the Garners' other guests, trying to appear relaxed while she kept a close watch on the door.

As the minutes ticked by, Claire's nerves became more and more frazzled. How did one greet one's lover in the midst of a crowded room? With a kiss and a warm embrace? A handshake? She had no idea.

And what about Matt? What would his attitude toward her be? He hadn't called since he'd left her bed to fly to Corpus.

Annoyed with her train of thought, Claire grimaced and pulled her eyes away from the entrance.

"Will you relax? He'll be here just as soon as he lands and changes into his tux." Sean's handsome face wore a look of pure devilment.

"Who will be here?" she asked.

"Matt. Who else?"

"And why should I care whether Matt shows up?"

Every sign of teasing left Sean's face. "Because, beautiful lady, whether you care to admit it or not, you're batty about the man."

"Is it that obvious?" she asked in a despairing little voice.

Sean relented at once. "No, of course not." He smiled gently. "Only to a born snoop like myself. And anyway, I'm sure the feeling is mutual." Grinning, his eyes raked over her. "In that dress, you'll knock his socks off. He'll probably take one look, fling you over his shoulder and carry you off somewhere to ravish you."

"That's what I like about you, Sean. You have such a classy way of putting things." Claire gave him a dry look and shook her head, all the while silently praying that he was right.

She had dressed hoping for just that sort of reaction. The fitted bodice of her long, royal blue gown clung lovingly to her breasts and waist, while the gathered silk chiffon skirt fell in soft folds to swirl around her ankles like a cloud of mist. The V neckline was just low enough to be intriguing and the tightly cuffed diaphanous sleeves provided enticing glimpses of her bare arms while covering them. Somehow, the gown contrived to be both sexy and decorous.

Idly, Claire lifted her glass of champagne, then froze as her gaze was drawn to the door. Matt had just arrived, and clinging to his arm was a very beautiful young woman.

For a moment Claire couldn't breathe, or even move. The shaking glass of champagne was taken from her and Sean's arm slid comfortingly around her waist. "Now don't get upset. I'm sure

there's a very good explanation. Just play it cool, Claire."

When Matt and his lovely companion stopped directly in front of her, Claire forced a smile. "Hello, Matt. We'd begun to think you weren't going to make it."

"Hello, Claire," he said warmly, his eyes burning into her with a silent message. "I'd like you to meet Elaine Broughton—" he turned to the couple on his right —and her parents, Lloyd and Charlotte Broughton. Lloyd and my father have been friends since before I was born," he tacked on pointedly.

"How nice. I'm very pleased to meet you." Claire's face was coolly composed, her faint smile one of formal politeness. It was her intention to excuse herself from the cozy little group just as soon as possible and she was already edging away when Matt's hand closed around her wrist like a manacle.

"Would you excuse us, please. There is something very important I must discuss with Claire." He smiled urbanely at the elder Broughtons, disentangled his arm from Elaine's and led Claire away.

She walked stiffly at his side, fuming.

When they reached a small window alcove, Matt pulled her inside and placed himself squarely in front of her, glaring down. "All right. Let's get something straight right now. I am *not* interested in Elaine Broughton."

Claire turned her head to the side. "I don't want to listen to this. It's none of my business," she replied.

"Like hell it isn't!" he growled. "How can you say that, after the other night? I guarantee you, if you had come waltzing in here on another man's arm I'd have knocked him flat in two seconds."

Claire's eyes opened wide. "Yet you came in here with that...that...*girl* draped all over you!"

"I ran into the Broughtons as I was coming in, and Elaine latched on to me. I've known her since the day she was born and she's a pest, but I wasn't going

to hurt her parents' feelings by being rude."

Dazed, Claire looked back at him with misty eyes, feeling the painful ache in her chest slowly disappear. "Oh, Matt." The words came out in a cracked whisper. "I'm so sorry. It's just that I was so looking forward to seeing you, and then..."

Matt's face softened. "Claire, listen to me. A little old-fashioned jealousy I can handle." He shook his head and gave her a wry smile. "In fact, I'd probably welcome it. But don't ever hide from me behind that cool composure of yours. I hate that."

"I'm sorry," she repeated softly.

Matt's eyes dropped to her parted lips and a blaze of desire quickly flared in their blue depths. "My God, I want to kiss you," he whispered roughly. "Come on, let's get out of here." Grabbing her wrist, he turned and started for the door.

"But Matt, we can't leave," Claire protested weakly.

"Not only *can* we leave, we're going to. I've made other plans for us. The only reason I came here at all was to pick you up."

Claire barely had time to retrieve her mink wrap before Matt bundled her out the door and into his waiting car. It wasn't until sometime later, when Claire realized they were nowhere near her apartment, that she became curious.

"Where are we going, Matt?" she asked.

"We're on our way to the airport. We're going back to the farm to have that weekend I promised you." He slanted her a wicked glance. "Only this time we'll have the whole place to ourselves."

BY THE TIME they reached the farmhouse in the small hours of the morning, Claire was so exhausted she could barely stand. The week of emotional tension and the long flight had left her drained.

She stood in the charming entryway, swaying on her feet, and watched drowsily as Matt locked the door.

He turned around and his face softened at the sight of her drooping shoulders and heavy-lidded eyes. Without a word, he swung her up in his arms and started up the stairs.

"Mmm, where are you taking me?" she murmured sleepily into his chest.

"To bed." Matt smiled. "You're dead on your feet. What you need, my love, is about eight straight hours of sleep. I'll admit I want to make love to you, but that can wait. Tonight I'm going to enjoy just holding you in my arms." He pressed a soft kiss against her lips. "We have a lot more going for us than just sex, Claire. A lot more," he said in a husky, serious voice that made her heart turn over.

CLAIRE AWOKE to find herself lying half on top of Matt. Her legs were tangled intimately with his. Her nose was buried in the crisp hair that covered his chest. She breathed in deeply of his scent and sighed happily.

Drawn by the lure of his body, Claire's eyes lowered once again to the lustrous mat of dark hair covering his chest, following it down to where it narrowed and disappeared beneath the sheet that lay in a twisted tangle around his hips. With great daring, Claire slid her palm over his taut, flat abdomen, smiling with satisfaction as she felt his muscles contract under her hand. Moving outward, her hand slipped beneath the sheet and cupped his hipbone, massaging gently; then her fingertips drew a feathery line from his hip to his knee, paused, and trailed back up the inside of his thigh.

Matt's low moan stilled her hand.

"Good morning," she said softly, smiling up into his glittering blue eyes, her own soft and inviting.

"Good morning," he choked out. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mmm, like a log." Holding his gaze, Claire trailed a finger along the juncture where his leg met his body, and smiled again when he sucked in a hissing breath. "But I'm awake now," she added. "And not the least bit tired."

It was all the invitation Matt needed. With a deep growl, his mouth swooped down on hers. Claire's arms coiled around his neck as he rolled her onto her back and crushed her lips with his. They had slept naked in each other's arms, and now his hands roamed freely over her slender curves while he kissed her with hungry passion.

Her trembling hands roamed eagerly across the hard, flat muscles in his back. His skin was warm beneath her touch, as her fingers delicately traced along his spine, all the way to its base.

Matt's groan was quickly followed by a gasp from Claire as his tongue drew tiny circles down her neck and his hands grazed lightly across her sensitive nipples. Kissing a path to her breasts, he slid downward and eased his body between her thighs. He slid lower, his lips tasting, caressing the smooth skin of her abdomen as his hands stroked her thighs, her calves, the backs of her knees. The velvety rasp of his tongue sent shivers through Claire as it licked a wet circle around her navel, then delved inward with slow, languorous strokes.

Whimpering, her fingers clutching at his hair while her taut, trembling body surged against his lips, Claire was nearing the point of madness when, at last, he eased himself up the length of her body.

Gladly, her arms enfolded him, bringing his hard torso down against her bareness. As their lips met, Matt slid his hands beneath her hips, lifting her into his possession, their bodies merging with a sweet sensuality that took Claire's breath away.

With slow, sensuous movement, they began the age-old journey toward fulfillment. Trembling, whispering soft, incoherent words of love, they gave

themselves up to the fierce passion that burned within them. As their pace became more rapid, the tension built into a delicious agony until, at last, the explosion came.

Clutching each other tightly, they cried out in unison, then drifted slowly downward, shuddering as waves of ecstasy continued to wash over them.

THE SUN HAD reached its zenith before the lovers left their bed. After they had showered together—an exhilarating new experience for Claire—Matt gave her her first cooking lesson.

The results were less than spectacular. Her pancakes resembled puckered tire patches and her scrambled eggs had a rubbery bounce, but they ate every bite as though it were ambrosia, smiling at one another across the table.

Matt dug out a pair of Bev's old jeans, faded almost white and threadbare in spots, and a pair of dilapidated boots, but a thorough search turned up nothing in the way of a top. In the end Claire had to settle for one of Matt's flannel shirts, which fit her like a tent. Dressed in this disreputable garb, her hair tied back with a piece of yarn, Claire happily spent what remained of the afternoon roaming hand in hand over the farm with Matt.

After showering before dinner, Claire washed out her underthings and hung them over the towel rack to dry. She returned to the bedroom and riffled through Matt's clothing, but her only choice was another of his voluminous shirts. She slipped into it, rolling up the sleeves almost to her elbows, then walked over to the dresser.

Her reflection made her laugh aloud. Other than the tube of pale rose lipstick in her evening bag, she hadn't a speck of makeup with her, and her face was scrubbed clean and shining. She picked up Matt's brush and started raking it through her hair, smiling at her mirrored image. "I'm loved. And I love." Claire said the words in a quiet voice filled with

wonder, knowing that for the very first time in her thirty-nine years they were true.

MATT WAS standing at the kitchen counter scoring the edges of two steaks when Claire walked in. He looked up and smiled. "Hi. You hungry?"

"Yes, starving."

"Good. If you'll set the table, we'll be ready to eat in a few minutes."

He began to season the steaks, but the sound of Claire's soft humming drew his attention and he turned to watch her. God, she's so beautiful, he thought, drinking in the sight of her.

Claire turned and caught him staring. "What is it?"

"You." Holding her eyes with his steady gaze, he held out his arms. "Come here."

The look of love shining in her soft gray eyes as she glided toward him brought a painful lump to Matt's throat. He pulled her into his arms. "Oh, Claire, Claire." His voice was raspy, raw with emotion. Tilting her head back, he stared down into her love-softened face, his eyes a dark, glittering blue. "I love you... so very much." He kissed her with a slow, burning intensity.

"But, Matt, the dinner..."

"It can wait," he growled. "I can't."

Much later, after the delayed dinner had been eaten and the dishes cleared away, Claire sat on the sofa, snuggled against Matt's side and staring dreamily at the dancing flames in the fireplace. She felt sated, complete, content.

The arm encircling her shoulders pulled her closer. "I don't like it, but I suppose we'll have to wait until after the election to get married," Matt said.

Claire sat straight up and faced him. "Matt," she breathed. "You want to marry me?"

Her question brought an affronted look to his face. "Of course I want to marry you. I love you."

"Well... I... I..." She shrugged. "I guess I didn't think marriage appealed to you."

"Oh, it appeals to me, all right. Claire, you've met my family. You know my background. Coming from that environment, how could you possibly think I wouldn't want a home and family of my own?" He brought her face down to his. Their lips met, pulled apart, and met again. "I just hadn't met the right woman, that's all. Or rather, the right woman wasn't free. But she is now. And I want very, very much to make her mine." Claire melted at the passionate entreaty in his expression, the love in his eyes. "Will you marry me, Claire?" he asked solemnly.

Half laughing, half sobbing, Claire buried her face against his neck. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

"Hey! You're not going to cry, are you?" he teased.

"Yes! No! Oh... I don't know!" She sniffed noisily. After a moment she lifted her head. "Oh, Matt, I'm so happy," she quavered.

"So am I, love. So am I." Threading his fingers through her hair, he kissed her slowly, deeply.

"Claire, there's something I want to ask you," he said long minutes later.

"What's that?"

"Do you really want to win this election?"

Something in his voice made her uneasy. "Well, I am rather deeply committed," she replied evasively.

He remained silent, and after a minute Claire's eyes widened at what she read in his face. "You don't want me to win, do you, Matt?" she asked.

Matt sighed. "I can't honestly say I'm thrilled over the prospect. We both know how time-consuming the job is. But I'd never ask you to quit on my account. What really concerns me, though, is how tough it's going to be on you, having a family while you're occupying a seat in Congress."

"A family? Children? You want *children*?"

"Yes, I want children." He smiled. "Our children."

Claire sat up and edged slightly away. She stared at the leaping flames. "Matt, since you feel that way, perhaps you should marry someone younger." She turned to look at him, her eyes swimming with doubt. "I'm thirty-nine, darling. I'm not even sure I can *have* any more children."

"No!" With a lunge, he grabbed her and toppled them both onto the fur rug before the hearth. Rolling onto his back, he hauled her up on top of him. "Listen to me, Claire! If you can't have children, or don't want to, we'll adopt. Or if that doesn't appeal to you, we just won't have any. But don't ask me to give you up. That I won't do."

"Oh, darling," she breathed shakily. Matt held her close, crushing her mouth against his. His rapacious tongue plundered the sweet depths beyond her teeth while his free hand memorized the shape of her back and hips.

Claire responded eagerly, her body melting into his, her tongue darting out, tempting, touching and retreating, luring him on. When their lips parted Claire drew back, breathing deeply. Her eyes were clouded with desire, heavy-lidded, her mouth swollen.

Matt's hands sought the buttons on her shirt. In response to his silent command Claire lifted up, allowing him free access to her body, and he pushed the shirt aside. He watched her face as his fingers stroked up the sides of her breasts, curving around them to cup the heavy fullness in his palms. With soft, brushing strokes, his thumbs brought her nipples to erect peaks. A sensuous smile curved his lips at Claire's low, moaning response.

Lifting his head, Matt traced wet circles around each rosy areola, stopping at intervals to flick the swollen tips with a tormenting, raspy touch.

"Do you like that?" he asked in a seductive whisper.

"Oh, yes," Claire moaned breathlessly, clutching his head to pull it back to her aching flesh.

Matt's mouth closed around the swollen bud. Her hair hung around them in a golden curtain as he drew on her sweetly. The rhythmic tugging sent a hot rush of desire through Claire, throbbing outward from the core of her being. She clutched at his hair, her back arching as her whole body seemed to clench in delicious agony.

Seeking to return the pleasure he had given her, Claire moved downward on his chest, her hands tearing at the buttons on his shirt. When they were free she pushed it aside, and first her fingers, then her lips found the flat male nipples. Her blond tresses tangled in the dark hair on his chest as she brushed her mouth and tongue lovingly over his body.

Groaning, Matt grasped her head and forced it up. His face, rigid with desire, was lit with an orange glow from the fire. His blue eyes were bright and feverish, staring at her with a desperate longing. "Tell me you'll marry me, Claire," he demanded. "Tell me!"

Claire gently stroked his cheek and smiled. "Yes. I'll marry you, my love. Whenever you say."

Holding her gaze, Matt rolled with her until they were lying face-to-face on their sides. He drew her hand downward, pressing it against the brass buckle of his belt. "Undress me, darling," he urged. "Let me show you how much I love you."

*

MATT UNLOCKED the door to Claire's Houston apartment and swung it open. The moment they stepped into the entryway he kicked it shut and reached for her. "Ah, alone at last." He sighed, locking his hands at the small of her back.

Laughing, Claire said, "Matt! Except for the plane trip, we've been alone for the last forty-eight hours!"

He bent and placed his forehead against hers. "It wasn't enough," he growled softly. "Somehow, I don't think I'll ever get enough of being alone with you." Claire closed her eyes, sighing as she felt the gentle pressure of his lips.

"Mother, where the devil have you been?"

The strident demand shattered the silence, jerking them apart instantly. Claire turned to see her daughter stride through the arch from the living room.

"Joanna! What are you doing here? I thought you were spending the weekend at Sally Crestwell's."

"Sally came down with some sort of virus and her party was canceled, so I flew in yesterday. I tried to reach you Friday night and got no answer. And no one at campaign headquarters seemed to have any idea where you were."

Claire cast an uncomfortable glance at Matt. Lord, she wasn't prepared for this. "Matt invited me to his farm for the weekend," she explained.

"Again? Really, Mother." Joanna sighed. "Don't you think you and Mr. Drummond are carrying this hoax a bit too far? The next thing you know the gossip mongers will be saying you're engaged."

"And they won't be wrong," Matt inserted quietly.

"What?" For the first time Joanna turned her full attention on him. "What did you say?"

Claire shot Matt a desperate look, which he ignored. "You may as well be the first to congratulate us, Joanna. Your mother and I are going to be married."

Appalled, Claire bit her lower lip hard. She had meant to break the news to Joanna gently, when the time was right. Not like this.

Joanna recoiled a step. "You can't mean that!" Her eyes shot to Claire. "Mother, what is he saying?"

"Joanna, darling, please try to understand," Claire exhorted gently. "Matt and I love each other, and we want to spend the rest of our lives together."

"But you can't! How could you even consider it?" Joanna stood rigid, breathing hard, her eyes filled with fury as she glared first at Claire, then Matt. "If you marry him, I'll never speak to you again." Without another word, she pushed past Claire and stormed down the hall to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her with such force the pictures rattled on the walls.

THE NEXT MORNING Claire was sitting at the kitchen table with a breakfast of black coffee and toast when Joanna entered. Her expression was sullen, withdrawn.

"You're up early," Claire ventured.

"I'm going to campaign headquarters with you. I told you I wanted to help," Joanna said sharply.

Claire's brows rose a fraction. "I see. Well, there's certainly plenty to do. But in all honesty, I'm surprised you still want to... after last night."

Anxiety flashed across Joanna's face and her eyes opened wide. "You are still running, aren't you?"

"Don't worry, I'm still a candidate," Claire assured her gently.

Joanna sipped her coffee. "You mean Mr. Drummond doesn't object to you becoming a U.S. senator?"

"Yes and no," Claire admitted candidly. "He would like to have a larger chunk of my time, but he also believes that I'll make a very good senator. He's leaving the decision up to me."

For a few minutes Joanna was very quiet, then she looked up suddenly, right into Claire's eyes. "You're determined to marry him, aren't you?"

Claire's gaze didn't waver. "Yes."

The tension in the room was palpable.

At last, Joanna drew a deep breath. "Then I guess I'll just have to accept it," she muttered resentfully.

Claire could hardly believe it. She had been braced for a battle royal. And now, calmly if not graciously, Joanna had retreated from her harsh stand.

Reaching across the table, Claire clasped her daughter's free hand between her own. "Thank you, darling," she said. "You've made me very, very happy."

During the days that followed, to Claire's growing pleasure and relief Joanna behaved admirably, though her attitude toward Matt remained distant and cool. Claire told herself that would change as time went by. At this stage, it was only natural for her still to harbor some resentment.

For Claire, life was suddenly marvelous, and her happiness knew no bounds. Matt informed Sean and Eric of their plans to marry, but after an open discussion, it was decided they would withhold any formal announcement until after the election. As the days passed, Claire's spirits lifted higher and higher. Everything was going right: Matt loved her; Joanna was accepting the situation with increasing good grace; Claire was ahead in all the polls. Even the April weather was cooperating.

Things were so perfect that Claire was not really surprised when she returned from a luncheon on Friday to find a telephone message from Marjorie Bonner: "I'm sorry. Please come to the Warwick Hotel, room 406, at two o'clock and we will discuss it."

Claire closed her eyes, biting her lower lip to hold back the tears. The loss of her old friend had been a bitter blow, but now, thank God, it seemed that Marjorie wanted to heal the breach.

Checking her watch, Claire grabbed her purse and started for the door. "Betty, Matt is over at Channel Three," she said. "When he returns, tell him I've gone to speak to Marjorie Bonner and I'm not sure when I'll be back."

CLAIRE'S STOMACH lurched when the hotel elevator whispered to a halt. She hurried down the hall, her eyes darting from door to door, searching for suite 406. When she found it, she raised her hand and tapped lightly.

As it was opened, "Hi, I..." Claire began. Then, "Phillip!"

"Claire!"

They spoke in unison, each drowning out the other. Then Phillip stepped closer and grasped her upper arms. "Oh, Claire, it's so good to see you again," he said.

Claire's mouth dropped open. She hadn't seen Phillip in almost three months, since the night he had taken her out to dinner.

"I'm here to see Marge," she informed him coolly, attempting to pull free.

"Marge isn't here. She didn't come with me this trip."

"But...but that's impossible! I received a message that—"

The words caught in her throat as a blinding flash of light burst over them. Startled, they both turned to see a man sprinting away toward the exit, the tail of his gray suit coat flapping.

Claire stood perfectly still, listening to his footsteps clumping down the stairs, and slowly, the truth sank in.

Set up. Dear Lord, she'd been set up.

CLAIRE SAT in the corner of the sofa, curled up in a ball of misery as she watched Matt pace restlessly from one end of the living room to the other. He was angry. No, he was furious. And he had every right to be. How could she have been such a fool? She should have known that Marge would never offer an olive branch. She had meant every word of that angry tirade.

The phone rang and Matt spun away to answer it. "You're sure about that?" he questioned curtly, and after a short pause, "All right then, let me know if

you hear anything. I'll be at this number."

He turned to Claire. "That was my father. He's checked with every major newspaper that the family owns. There's been no news item on you. Not over the wire services or through any other sources."

"So what do we do now?" Claire asked, baffled.

"We wait. All night, if we have to."

The hours passed with dragging slowness. In between periodic phone calls from his father, Matt continued to pace like a caged lion. Joanna spent most of the time curled up in a chair, flipping rapidly through one magazine after another. Claire tried to stay busy. She made coffee and sandwiches, which were barely touched, then spent an hour trying to study a proposed congressional bill.

When the doorbell chimed at about eleven they all jumped as though they'd been shot. Recovering first, Matt stalked toward the entrance hall, saying over his shoulder, "That's probably Sean and Eric."

But when he returned a few minutes later, it was Will Kiley who accompanied him.

Blank astonishment registered on Claire's face. "Why, Mr. Kiley! What are you doing here?" she exclaimed.

"He came to bring these." Matt handed Claire a large brown envelope.

"A messenger service delivered those to my hotel suite about a half hour ago, Mrs. Andrews," Will Kiley explained gravely. "I thought you'd like to have them."

Nausea churned in Claire's stomach as she stared at the glossy black-and-white photo of herself and Phillip. It was a picture that could easily be misconstrued. Phillip was gripping her upper arms, his expression one of undisguised longing. Her own stunned look could very well be taken for anguish.

"The negative is there also, so I don't think you have anything to worry

about," Will Kiley added. "Whoever sent them obviously thought I'd put them to good use."

A slight smile lifted the corners of Claire's mouth. She extended her hand and it was instantly swallowed up in her opponent's larger one. "I really don't know how to thank you, Mr. Kiley."

"Don't think a thing about it, Mrs. Andrews. I owed you one, remember? Besides, I don't know what's going on or who's behind it, but I don't like his tactics."

"We don't know who's responsible either, Will, but I damned sure intend to find out," Matt informed him.

ONE LOOK at his grim, tight face the following afternoon and Claire knew he'd discovered something. "What is it? Tell me!"

Matt stepped inside and closed the door. He looked at her worriedly. "I found the photographer," he said at last. "His name is Richard Dutton, but he's only a hireling."

"Did he tell you who paid him to do it?"

"No. He didn't get her name, but he gave me a description."

"A woman was behind this?" Claire stared at him. "Then...it must have been Marjorie," she said.

"No, I don't think so. The description he gave me was of a young woman. A very young woman."

Shocked speechless, Claire could only gape at him. "But...but who could it be? And why?"

Matt glanced toward the doorway. "Is Joanna here?"

"What? Oh...yes. She's in the living room," Claire replied. "I guess we should go tell her what you've learned."

Joanna straightened as they entered the room. Her anxious brown eyes went from one to the other. "Well?"

"Matt traced the photographer, but he could only give us a description of the

woman who hired him," Claire explained.

"Well, that isn't much help," Joanna snapped. "You'll never find her in a city this size."

"Oh, I don't know," Matt mused. "It was a very good description. Brown hair, brown eyes, classy looking, about eighteen or nineteen. He also said she looked vaguely familiar." Matt eyed Joanna for a moment, then added softly, "In fact, he could have been describing you."

"*Me!*" Joanna sprang off the sofa. "Are you *crazy?*"

"Matt, please." Claire looked at him imploringly. A terribly icy fear was slowly enveloping her.

Regret softened Matt's expression when his gaze switched briefly to Claire. But then Joanna reclaimed his attention. "No, I'm not crazy. And I don't want to believe it, but the resemblance is too strong to ignore."

"But why would I do such a thing?"

"Suppose you tell me."

"Oh, this whole thing is absurd!" Joanna railed.

"Maybe," Matt conceded. "But one way to clear it up is for you to come with me to meet the photographer."

Joanna spun around. "*I most certainly will not!*" she gritted.

"Why not?" Matt's expression was bland, polite. "If you're not the woman, then you have nothing to worry about, do you?"

"I will *not* be subjected to this kind of...of...*persecution!* Tell him, Mother! You tell him to leave me alone!"

Claire's expression was a mixture of pain and bewilderment. She could see that for some misguided reason he actually believed Joanna guilty. "Matt, darling, don't..."

"Claire, I want you to trust me on this. If I'm wrong I'll apologize. Profusely." His glance cut to Joanna's defiant face. "But I don't think I am. Unfortunately, the only way to prove it is to bring about

a meeting between Joanna and the photographer."

At that moment Claire knew exactly what it felt like to be spread out on a rack and pulled in two directions. She loved them both, and they were tearing her apart.

Claire searched Joanna's angry face for the truth. "Joanna, you didn't hire that photographer and send the photos to Will Kiley, did you?"

"*No, I did not.*" Joanna's voice was frigid, each word precise and clipped.

Claire turned to Matt in silent desperation. "Matt, please...I—"

"For God's sake, Claire! The man's description was very detailed. Right down to the little mole at the corner of her mouth."

Claire's eyes widened. "Joanna...?"

"I told you I didn't do it! What more do you want?" Joanna shouted. Meeting her defiant glare, Claire found it impossible to doubt her. Yet, Matt was so positive....

Feeling sick, Claire turned her anguished gaze back to Matt. "Matt, please. I can't insist that she go with you. Don't you see, if I did, it would be the same as saying I don't believe her, or trust her. Oh, darling, please understand. She's *my daughter.*"

Matt ignored her outstretched hand. He looked at her, and his azure eyes held a glint of sadness. "Claire, you once told me you would not allow yourself to be used or manipulated again, but that's exactly what Joanna is doing. Don't you see that?"

"But, Matt! Joanna *wants* me to win the election. Why would she sabotage my campaign?"

"To drive a wedge between us would be my guess. And from the looks of things, I'd say she's succeeded."

Fear clutched at Claire's heart. What was he saying? Shaken, she placed her hand on his arm. "Matt, please don't make me take sides."

He sighed and placed a hand over hers. Slowly, his warm fingers stroked over her icy skin. "It's not a matter of taking sides, Claire. It's a matter of being true to yourself, of taking control of your own life. Don't you see that you're trying to win Joanna's love by knuckling under to her demands, the same way you did with K.L. and Joseph?" He looked deep into her eyes, willing her to understand. "It doesn't work, Claire. People have to love you the way you are. You can't buy love, not with money or acquiescence."

Claire stared at him, stricken by his words. What could she say? How could she make him see that she was merely trying to meet Joanna halfway, to reestablish the closeness they'd once had?

The faint glow of hope faded from Matt's eyes as he stood watching her. When he gently removed her hand from his arm, she gave in to pure panic.

"Matt, please!"

"I'm sorry, darling. I can't help you anymore. The rest is up to you. When you're ready to follow your own dream, let me know," he whispered tenderly. "You know where I'll be."

He bent and brushed his mouth across her parted lips, then turned and strode out of the room. A moment later the front door closed with a soft click.

THERE WAS only a handful of volunteers manning the outer workroom the following morning. Claire nodded and smiled graciously as she wound her way through the jumble of desks and tables, but didn't stop until she had reached her office.

Huddled in a tight group with their heads together, Sean, Eric, Betty and Thelma stood beside Betty's desk, but at Claire's approach they broke apart and turned to greet her.

"Good morning, all." She smiled her greeting to everyone, then added as casually as possible, "Betty, would you ask Matt to come into my office, please?"

The stricken look on Betty's face sent panic surging through Claire. It was Sean who spoke. "Why don't we go into your office, Claire," he said quietly. "I have something to tell you."

Claire glanced at the others, then back at Sean, and without a word she allowed him to lead her through the door. From somewhere, she dredged up the courage to say, "All right, Sean. Spit it out. What's happened?"

He moved to stand in front of her. Grimly, his eyes locked with hers. "Matt's gone, Claire," he said simply.

She drew in a sharp breath. "What do you mean, gone?"

"He was clearing out his desk when I came in at eight. He gave me this for you." Sean drew an envelope out of his pocket. "It's his resignation. He said to tell you that everything is in order and all the arrangements have been made. And that you should have no more trouble, now that he's out of the picture." Sean's brows rose quizzically. "Does that make any sense to you?"

Claire squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Oh, yes. She understood. Matt was saying that he believed Joanna was guilty, but once he was no longer a part of her life, Joanna would have no more reason to make trouble.

It wasn't true. It *couldn't* be true. But Claire knew there was only one way she would ever convince Matt of that, and she simply couldn't humiliate her daughter that way. If she wanted to build a close relationship with Joanna, she had to show that she trusted her. But the thought of a life without Matt was almost unbearable. Claire's shoulders began to shake as she struggled to contain the harsh, jerking sobs that tore at her throat.

Warm hands gripping her shoulders made her start, and her eyes flew open. For a moment she'd forgotten about Sean. Claire stared up at him.

Shaking his head sadly, Sean pulled her to him and pressed her face against his

chest. "Let it out, Claire," he urged. "You'll feel better when you do."

The compassion in his voice snapped the last thread of her frayed composure and Claire wilted against him, letting the great, wrenching sobs burst from her throat. When at last she pushed away and rubbed her knuckles across her swollen eyes, Sean pressed a handkerchief into her hand.

He looked at her with deep concern. "Okay now?"

After a moment, she nodded. "I...I'm sorry. I don't usually f-all a-apart like that."

"Hey, don't apologize. It was the best thing for you. I'm just glad I could provide a shoulder to cry on."

FOR THE NEXT ten days Claire went through the motions of campaigning in a state of numbness. She made the last statewide tour, which Matt had arranged, and was on the go constantly, making several speeches a day. She did all the right things, said all the right things, smiled in all the right places. But the aching sense of loss, the black despair she had carried with her since Matt's departure, grew more painful with each passing day. She felt as though she would never be whole again.

By the end of the tour the strain was beginning to tell. She hadn't been eating or sleeping well. Her slender body was becoming gaunt and her face now had a haunted beauty, her eyes glazed with sorrow.

She arrived back in Houston two weeks before the election, completely exhausted. Joanna had accompanied her on the trip, but she was flying back to college in Virginia the next day.

The morning of their return Claire was standing at the balcony doors staring out when Joanna walked into the living room. Plopping down into a chair, she announced, "Well, that's that. I've repacked my bags. I'm all set."

Claire smiled. "I've enjoyed having you with me these past weeks."

"Yeah, it's been fun."

Smiling tolerantly at her daughter's blasé agreement, Claire turned her gaze back to the city's skyline. Within seconds her thoughts were once again on Matt. Her eyes misted with tears as she thought of the short but beautiful time they'd had together. She had never known that kind of happiness before. And now it was over. *Oh, Matt, Matt. I still love you so.*

"Mother! Did you hear a word I said?" Joanna's voice finally broke through Claire's painful thoughts.

"What? Oh! I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me you're still mooning over Matt Drummond? I thought you'd gotten over that days ago."

"It's not that easy when you're in love with someone," Claire replied with just a hint of sharpness in her voice. Up until now Joanna had wisely held her tongue on the subject.

"Oh, good grief!" Joanna spat out in disgust. "You're talking like a sixteen-year-old girl. You know, Mother, has it ever occurred to you that it might have been Matt who hired Richard Dutton to take that photo? It's very possible that he was growing tired of you and was feeling trapped."

Brown eyes met gray ones, and the thick silence stretched on and on. Then Claire spoke, her face pale. "How did you know the photographer's name?" she asked in a strained voice. "Neither Matt nor I mentioned it to you."

For a brief instant panic flickered in Joanna's eyes. Then she shrugged. "You must have."

"No. No, I'm quite sure we didn't. Which makes me wonder how you came to know it."

Joanna's face grew sullen. She turned her head away.

"Joanna, look at me!" Claire demanded. She stared at her daughter's hostile face, feeling as though there was

a wide band around her chest that was slowly squeezing the life out of her body. "You did it, didn't you?" she said, "You set the whole thing up and hired Richard Dutton. *Didn't* you, Joanna?"

Their gazes locked in silent battle. Then, in a surge of reckless fury, Joanna bounded up and shouted, "All right! Yes, I did it!"

Every hint of color drained from Claire's face as she choked out, "But why? *Why?*"

"I would have done anything to get Matt Drummond out of your life. After the speculation about you and Congressman Bonner, I was certain Matt would think you were two-timing him. Instead, he trusted you." Joanna shrugged. "My original plan backfired, but things still worked out perfectly," she said with a nonchalance that made Claire want to slap her.

"My God, Joanna!" Claire cried. "Do you realize what a chance you took, sending that photo to Will Kiley? If he hadn't been an honorable man, you would not only have damaged my reputation and hurt my chances of being elected, but you might have destroyed Marge and Phillip's marriage! How could you *do* that?"

Momentary shame flickered across Joanna's face, then just as quickly disappeared as she stared back at Claire. "The Bonners are not my concern. Anyway, after what you'd told me about Mr. Kiley, I was fairly certain he wouldn't use the photo. But even if he had, it would have been worth it to get rid of Matt."

"Why?" Claire cried in an anguished voice. "What is there about Matt you find so objectionable?"

"*He's not Daddy!*" Joanna shot back.

The words hit Claire like a splash of ice water. She had never felt so hurt, so betrayed, in her entire life. She had lost the man she loved...all because of Joanna's selfishness.

With the thought came a consuming anger. Claire lifted her chin. Narrowed

gray eyes stabbed into Joanna. "You're right about one thing," she began. "Matt is nothing at all like your father...thank God! Matt would never marry me just to further his career...like your father did. Matt would never humiliate me by having affairs with other women...like your father did. Matt would never pretend to love me in public, then ignore me in private...*like your father did.*" Claire laughed shortly. "Oh, no. Matt loves me for myself."

Always before, Claire had shielded Joanna from any knowledge of her father's infidelities and the sorry state of their marriage. It was past time that she knew the truth.

"I don't believe you!" Joanna shrieked. "You're making it up to excuse your disloyalty to Daddy!"

"If you don't believe me, Joanna, just check around Washington. I think you're the only one in town who doesn't know."

"Where are you going?" Joanna demanded shrilly when Claire turned and headed for the door.

"I'm going to pack. Then I'm going to find Matt."

*

WHEN CLAIRE walked out of her Houston campaign headquarters that morning she had gone straight to her favorite beauty salon, and the new hairdo was the result. Ridding herself of the sleek, sophisticated hairstyle that had become her trademark, she felt suddenly light-headed and free, as though she had, at last, cut herself loose from the past.

She brought the rental car to a stop before the front porch of Matt's farmhouse and switched off the ignition. Claire sat perfectly still, staring at the rambling old house for some sign of life. There was none.

Oh please, God, let him be here. And let him still care.

Slowly, she climbed from the car and smoothed down the skirt of her green

linen dress. She mounted the steps and rang the bell. Through the door she could hear the soft chimes...then nothing. She pressed the button twice more, but after a few minutes her shoulders sagged. Matt wasn't there.

MATT SLID his hands into his pants pockets and looked up at the sky. As he neared the house, his eyes roamed over the gently rolling land. In his mind he could see Claire strolling along this same path in those faded old jeans, and the memory of that weekend rose to torment him. She had been so loving, so giving. No other woman had the power to excite him the way Claire did. Just the thought of her made his heart quicken and brought the familiar, stirring warmth to his loins.

A few seconds later he skirted the front corner of the house, took two steps, then came to an abrupt halt.

At the door, looking distraught and nervous but incredibly beautiful, was the woman who had occupied his every thought for the last two weeks.

Matt stared as though he could not believe his eyes. He didn't even hear the croaking of his own voice.

"Claire!"

Claire jumped and spun around as Matt surged up the steps two at a time and halted just inches from her. Awareness rippled through Claire as her senses were assaulted by the familiar scent of his body and the warmth that radiated from him. For a timeless moment they simply stared at each other.

Claire wanted to tell him that she was sorry, that he had been right all along, that she was, at last, ready to live her own life, but the words just wouldn't come. Instead she blurted out, "I cut my hair."

She cringed inwardly. What an inane thing to say!

But to her astonishment, Matt's eyes lifted to the feathery curls, and slowly a look of dawning understanding chased the tenseness from his expression.

"Oh, Claire." Sliding his arms around her, he brought her up against him in a bone-crushing embrace. "Oh, my darling, I've missed you so," he groaned against her skin.

With a small, throaty cry, Claire coiled her arms around his neck and clung. It was sheer heaven to be back in his arms. Words were not necessary. Standing with his feet braced wide apart, clasping her possessively to him, Matt rocked her back and forth. Each drew comfort from the other; each savored the intense pleasure of the moment.

At last he raised his head. They looked at each other silently, hungrily, all the love and longing there for each to see. Then Matt's gaze dropped to her mouth and, slowly, his head dipped. Their mouths meshed in a long searing kiss that throbbed with the aching need of two lonely weeks apart.

When at last their lips parted, Matt lifted a hand to cup her jaw. Warm and adoring, his eyes roamed over her love-softened face, touching each feature like a caress. A whimsical smile tugged at his mouth when he looked at her fluffy halo of soft curls.

"As much as I regret the loss of all that beautiful hair, I have to admit you look adorable," he whispered. "This *does* mean what I think it means, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Claire could barely get the word out. "I withdrew from the race, darling," she informed him quietly.

"Claire..." Her name came out as a long, incredulous whisper. Joy and deep concern warred in his expression as he searched her face. "Darling, are you sure? You're giving up an awful lot."

Claire smiled. "I'm very sure."

Lifting her hands, she held his face between her palms and looked deeply into his troubled eyes. "I never really wanted to be a senator. You know that. I was doing it more for Joanna than myself." She paused and her face sobered.

"Matt, this morning Joanna admitted she was the one who hired that photog-

rapher." Suddenly, hurt overwhelmed her and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, darling! You were right...about everything."

THE LITTLE white frame church sat in a secluded copse, its steeple rising above the treetops. To Claire it looked like something out of a Currier and Ives print. Walking hand in hand with Matt up the cobbled path to the entrance, she gazed at it with shining eyes.

There were only a few cars in the parking lot behind the church. With the help of a few friends in high places, Matt had managed to make the arrangements without tipping off the press. The only guests were Matt's family and a few very close friends.

At the door, Claire paused to smooth imaginary wrinkles from the swirling skirt of her rose silk dress and adjust the full, diaphanous sleeves. From inside she could hear the soft strains of organ music. She hadn't felt this jittery when she had been a bride of twenty.

She looked up to find Matt smiling at her. "Nervous?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Although why, I don't know."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. Very." And it was true. But as she smiled up into Matt's face, Claire knew she could not hide the trace of sadness in her eyes. He knew her too well.

"You haven't heard from her, have you?" he asked.

"No. I wrote, telling her of our plans and inviting her to the wedding, but I never received an answer."

Matt's warm hands closed around the curves of her shoulders. "Don't let it get you down, darling," he urged. "She'll come around eventually."

"I know." She touched his cheek. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm fine," she assured him quietly.

Their eyes held; then he placed a warm kiss against her palm. "Are you ready to become Mrs. Drummond?"

Smiling radiantly, Claire said, "I'm more than ready."

It was dark in the vestibule after the brightness of the May afternoon, and they paused just inside the doorway to allow their eyes to adjust to the dim light. The organ music swelled to a crescendo, and Claire's hand trembled on Matt's sleeve. He smiled down into her glowing face. "Ready?"

At her nod, they started forward.

"Mother...?"

The hesitant, barely audible voice sent Claire's heart pounding. She stopped abruptly and turned.

"Joanna..." The name came out in a whisper as her daughter stepped into the vestibule from a small anteroom. Unbridled joy lit Claire's face for just an instant, then was quickly reined in as she watched Joanna warily.

Dressed in a pale yellow suit that complimented her coloring, she looked very young, very lovely, and very vulnerable. "Mother, I..." Joanna bit her lower lip, and Claire was shocked to see her eyes well with tears. "I'm sorry, Mother, I...I was wrong," she choked out. "I did some checking, and everything you said was true. I didn't know... I never suspected..." She paused, looking shamefaced. "I guess I just never thought about what kind of marriage you and Daddy had. But now I realize how unhappy you must have been all those years."

Joanna's chin wobbled as the hovering tears slipped over onto her cheeks, but her gaze never wavered from Claire's face. "Please forgive me, Mother. I had no right to interfere in your life."

"Oh, sweetheart." Claire pulled Joanna into her arms and held her tightly. "I'm sorry you had to learn this way, darling. I know it hurts."

For several minutes they clung to each other in silence.

When at last Joanna had gained control, Claire looked into her eyes and smiled gently. "Sweetheart, I want you always to remember that your father

loved you very much. Regardless of what Joseph felt, or did not feel, for me, he was a good father. You have every right to be proud of him, and to cherish his memory."

"Thank you, Mother," Joanna whispered gratefully.

With a determined look, she pulled back from Claire's arms and turned to Matt. Her red-rimmed eyes met his in mute apology as she extended her hand. "Make her happy, Matt," she breathed shakily. "She deserves to be."

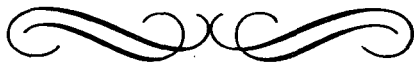
"I will, Joanna. I promise you that." Matt took her hand and squeezed it gently between both of his. There was

warm approval in the smiling look he gave her.

When Joanna had dried her tears and composed her features, Matt took Claire's hand and returned it to the crook of his arm.

"Now, ladies, I think it's time we got this wedding started," he declared softly.

Trembling, her heart so full she was sure it would burst, Claire sought Matt's gaze. Luminous gray eyes locked with blue ones, and in that moment she knew that all the old heartaches had been put to rest. The future lay before them, bright with the promise of happiness and a love that would endure forever.






BARBARA BRETTON

The Sweetest of Debts



Lainie Randall vowed she would never get involved with another man. But then she hadn't exactly counted on Matthew Ward entering her little world . . . and turning it upside down.



“What do you mean, you can’t do it tonight?” Lainie Randall asked.

The elderly mechanic lifted his cap and scratched his head. “We got the muffler, all right,” he said, ignoring the tall brunette’s rising agitation, “but we don’t have the supports.”

Lainie groaned. “What am I supposed to do now?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. Why hadn’t she paid attention to that faulty muffler weeks ago? So used to New York City driving, she’d never considered how a high-speed turnpike run would affect her car.

The mechanic replaced his cap.

“We-ell, I didn’t say we can’t do it ever.” He smiled. “It’ll get done by tomorrow morning.”

“But I need it tonight! I have to get to the other side of town.”

“Can’t anybody come and get you?”

“My aunt lives here in Gettysburg,” she explained, “but she’s going to Europe. She sold her car last week.”

He looked stumped for a moment, then brightened. “You wait here. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Lainie paced the driveway of the small station. She’d phoned Aunt Rita who had already left for her dinner engagement. The answering service told Lainie she was to go to Adams Avenue and get the key.

“From Ethan’s boy, Matthew,” the operator had said. “Ms. Randall said to tell you, if he isn’t there, he’s out on his bike and you should wait.”

“What on earth?” Lainie said as the mechanic wheeled a rickety, man’s black bicycle toward her.

“Take this, miss,” he said. “You can borrow it till tomorrow—no charge!”

“Thanks,” she said dubiously. “Are you *sure* there’s no cab company I could call?”

He looked at her as if she were insane. “And waste good money? It’s a beautiful afternoon—do you more good to get some country air into those city lungs.”

She laughed and accepted the challenge. After giving him her phone number at Rita’s she set out for Steinwehr Avenue, the main street of Gettysburg.

Although not superstitious by nature, Lainie was a firm believer in fate. When her aunt Rita, the woman who had taught her everything she knew about independence, called six weeks ago to offer her an all-expenses-paid summer in Gettysburg, caring for her elegant gift shop, Lainie took it as an omen and said yes. With her thirtieth birthday approaching, hadn’t she been feeling the need to step back and take a good long look at her life? Even her stained-glass artwork didn’t provide the fulfillment it once had. She needed to reassess, and where better than in this quiet town where her father and Rita had spent their youth?

Lainie was so absorbed in the spectacle of small town life that she nearly missed her turn. Adams was still. She pedaled past house after house, each one homier than the one before. She longed to stop the bike and settle down on a front lawn, silent as a blade of grass, to absorb some of the old-fashioned beauty. She understood instinctively why, even at the height of Rita’s career as a buyer for a famous Manhattan department store, her aunt had held on to Gettysburg as home base.

Ethan Whatever’s house, at the corner of Adams and Brook, was a vision of Victoriana set some thirty feet back from

the street. Painted lemon yellow, with its curlicued trim enameled in white around long, narrow windows, the house had a turret that rose from its center, and large octagonal windows that cried out for stained glass.

An enormous wraparound porch spanned the entire ground floor. All it needed, she mused, was a shaggy dog asleep on the top step and a pitcher of lemonade served up by a rosy-cheeked lady in a gingham apron.

Well, there's the shaggy dog, she thought as she stopped near the garage. He was asleep by the screen door to the house. However, the person she saw bending over a large black motorcycle could hardly be envisioned in an apron.

He was fussing over something in the engine area of the cycle, bare from the waist up. A red sweatshirt tied across his middle obscured the shorts she assumed he was wearing.

From her years of art training, she was used to the sight of nude male bodies of all kinds, but she'd rarely felt the urge to slide her hands across the swelling musculature of a back in order to understand the structure.

"Excuse me," Lainie called out, "I'm here for the key to Rita Randall's house."

Still with his back to her, he reached across the bike and took some pliers from the grass.

"I beg your pardon—" her voice took on a slight edge—"but I'd like the key."

He continued puttering with the cycle.

What on earth was the matter with him? She stormed across the driveway.

"The least you can do is grunt," she said, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"One grunt is yes—"

"What the hell?" He spun around, his hand gripping a metal ratchet. Thick sandy eyebrows rushed together in a scowl over electric blue eyes and his busy mustache did little to hide the annoyed set to his mouth.

She was about to apologize when she noticed the headset buried deep in his

thick, dark blond hair and the Walkman, half-hidden by the sweatshirt around his waist.

She reached up to yank the headphones off, but found her wrist encircled by a large strong hand.

"Do you like living dangerously?" he asked.

"I spoke to you three times," she answered, glancing from her captured wrist to his eyes, then back to her wrist.

"I'd think twice before I pulled a stunt like that again. For all I knew, you were a mugger. What if I'd slugged you?"

"Muggers in Gettysburg? Come on now." She sounded very blasé, yet she moved back a step, feeling vulnerable, but thankful her face usually concealed her emotions. "I'm Lainie Randall. Ethan's son is supposed to have the keys to my aunt Rita's house." She forced herself to sound businesslike.

But he had bent down again to adjust a wire and, as he leaned across the gleaming black and chrome BMW, she saw the pale crescent of a curved flat scar arcing from his left shoulder blade, up and over the muscle, disappearing around the front. Whatever surgery or accident he'd had, it had been major.

She cleared her throat. "I've had a long drive today and I still have to bike to Rita's, so I'd appreciate it if you could tell me where the key is."

"The key?" He looked at her, then glanced again at the cycle. "Damn! The ignition coil—I'll bet..." His words trailed off but then he motioned toward the back screen door. "It's the copper-colored one on the hook by the phone."

If the kitchen was any indication, the rest of the big yellow house was as quirky and charming as the exterior. What she couldn't figure out, however, was where that motorcycle mechanic outside fit into the picture. No, she thought as she slipped the key from the hook, it was a family kitchen.

"Get out while you can," she chided herself aloud. It would be too easy to let

herself stay. But she stopped in the doorway for one last look at the shining red maple of the paneling and cabinets, at the tiny figures on the wallpaper, at the sparkling terra-cotta floor tiles that had been worn into hollows near the sink and stove by many years of family living.

Lainie's footsteps echoed in the quiet. A deeper bluish tint was beginning to cover the sky. By the time she got to Rita's, it would be dark.

She was aware of a sidelong glance shot her way as she walked past the mechanic, a flash of electric blue that was quickly turned back on the motorcycle.

"I'm going," she announced. "Thanks for your help," she continued, as she circled him and headed down the driveway.

He raised a hand, complete with screwdriver.

"Anytime," he answered.

So that was Lainie Randall. He'd seen her picture on Rita's mantel but he'd not been prepared for the gold of her skin, the high coloring of cheeks and lips, the long luminous eyes that glinted with arrows of silver. That long hair like black silk.

He tossed the tools down and stood, absently rubbing the scarred left shoulder. Why hadn't he asked if she wanted a lift to Rita's—he had a car in the garage, after all—or called her a cab? He hadn't even introduced himself. The shock of recognition had rocked him to his core, and it was not the fact that he had seen her picture or knew her name. It went much deeper, much closer to the bone.

Damn.

No one from his other life would have believed he could be thrown like that by a woman.

"DO YOU PLAN on getting up sometime today?"

At first Lainie was sure she had imagined the question—perhaps it was part of her strange dream filled with motorcy-

cles, tall aloof blond men and blissful pleasure.

The bed sagged slightly as someone sat down.

"Rita!" Lainie sat up, the pale blue sheet dropping off her, and hugged her aunt.

Rita Randall, perfectly made-up and coiffed even at nine o'clock a.m., smiled back at her niece, who swung her long legs out of bed and stretched toward the ceiling.

Rita watched her rummage through her open suitcase for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. "Did you bring along anything besides your usual denim uniform?" she asked.

Lainie shrugged. "I could only stick the little suitcase in the bike's rack. I have a few pairs of trousers, some blouses, a dress—"

"What kind of dress?" Rita asked. "Is it everydayish or sexy?"

"It's so sexy it's practically punishable by law," Lainie answered, lowering her voice in parody. "Why do you ask? Has Gettysburg suddenly gone Puritan?"

Rita stood and smoothed the sheets on the sofa bed, then deftly folded it away.

"It's nothing like that," she said. "I just have an evening planned for us so I can show off my beautiful niece. Any objections?"

Lainie frowned. "Many. For one thing—"

Rita raised a hand to stop her. "Get dressed and we'll talk about it at breakfast, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Lainie grinned and saluted as Rita closed the door behind her and left her niece to shower and dress.

The hickory smell of bacon grilling curled under the guest room door. Lainie quickly applied the shadows and liners and mascara that gave the empty canvas of her strong face an illusion of mystery. She liked the feeling: She became exotic and slightly untouchable with her

makeup on; it was her armor against the world.

She slipped her feet into a pair of soft white leather moccasins and hurried downstairs.

If she were lucky, maybe here in Gettysburg, armor wouldn't be necessary.

"YOU MUST HAVE ESP," Lainie said, placing her napkin next to her empty plate. "How did you know how good pancakes and bacon would taste?" She leaned back and sighed contentedly.

Rita, ever elegant in a white silk shirt and slim black skirt tied round the waist with a turquoise and black sash, smiled and poured them each another cup of coffee.

"And since when, dear aunt," Lainie went on, "have you become such an expert at home-cooked meals? I thought fast food was a Randall family trait."

"I've been doing a bit of entertaining lately," Rita answered, "and experimenting with *nouvelle cuisine*."

To her surprise, Lainie saw the blush on her aunt's face. The *soignée*, unflappable Rita?

Rita's eyes met Lainie's for a second, just long enough for her to glimpse a softness, a certain sparkle that both surprised and intrigued her.

"Rita?" she asked, her voice uncertain.

The older woman smiled. "Someone will be joining us for dinner tonight," she finally said. "I've—uh—been seeing him pretty regularly. His name is Ethan Ward—"

"Ethan of the big yellow house?"

Rita nodded. "He'd like to take us out for dinner tonight as a sort of 'Welcome to Gettysburg' celebration for you."

"That's why you wanted to know if I had a good dress with me."

"That's part of it." Rita hesitated. "By the way, Ethan's son is staying with him. He's very interesting—has a Master's degree in history and—"

Lainie groaned. "Rita! You've never played matchmaker before. What's gotten into you?"

"Would you believe mid-life crisis?" She twirled her teaspoon in her coffee cup.

"Probably not." Lainie stood and put her empty cup in the dishwasher. The motorcycle mechanic was obviously no postgrad. She was about to ask if Ethan had more than one son when the chimes on the gift shop door adjacent to the small house sounded. Rita hurried to answer.

Lainie could hear a low male voice, Rita's "I didn't expect you so—" then the sound of muffled laughter. Overcome by curiosity, she went into the gift shop to see what was going on.

There, just inside the large, many-paned door, stood Rita and a distinguished looking man, wrapped in an embrace. He was lean and very tall, his slim physique making him seem even taller than he was. He had just bent down to kiss Rita when his eyes, so blue Lainie could see them across the room, landed on her. He straightened up and smiled.

"You don't have to tell me," he said, taking Rita's hand and crossing to where Lainie stood. "You're Lainie—you're even more beautiful than your pictures."

"You must be Mr. Ward," she answered, returning his smile and clasping his hand. Instead of shaking it, he pulled her to him in a warm hug. She looked over at Rita for a second as he released her, dark eyebrows shooting up with a million questions.

Rita shrugged and smiled.

"First of all, call me Ethan," he said. "I feel as if I know you."

"My aunt's been telling tales out of school?" Lainie adjusted her ponytail.

"Not at all. It's simply that I've had the pleasure of living with some of your stained-glass pieces for the last few months." She looked to Rita for further explanation.

"You've made quite a splash in the gift shop," Rita answered. "That's one of the surprises I've been saving. I have a nice-size check for you. All of the wind-chimes and suncatchers sold out the first week. Ethan purchased the Tiffany-style chandelier, the art deco bedside lamp and the framed mirror stand."

"I'm in shock," Lainie said finally, visions of all the supplies she could buy dancing through her head.

"Well, you'd better make a quick recovery," Rita said. "I have enough orders to keep you busy while I'm in Europe."

"I'd better go pick up my car and drive it to Lancaster. I need panes and lead tubing and copper foil and—"

"That sounds like an all-day proposition," Rita said. "Be sure you're back by six."

Ethan cleared his throat. "I'd be happy to drive you to the service station. It might save you a little time."

"That's very kind of you, Ethan," she said, "but I borrowed a bicycle last night from the owner of the repair shop and I have to ride it back."

"Perhaps we could put the bike in my trunk."

"Thanks, but that's okay," Lainie noticed how his hand had not released Rita's the whole time he'd been in the store.

She hurried upstairs to get her pocketbook. Outside in broad daylight, the bicycle looked older and more rickety than ever.

"Maybe you *should* let Ethan drive you," Rita said.

Lainie swung one blue-jeaned leg over the bike and hopped onto the seat. "This is sturdier than it looks," she said. "I made it here last night, didn't I?"

"I'm surprised my son didn't offer you a ride," Ethan said, half to himself.

"I don't think I met your son," Lainie said, but the statement was lost as Rita spoke to Ethan.

"Is Matthew joining us for dinner?"

"I'm not sure," he replied, "but I hope so."

As she wobbled down the driveway toward the street, Ethan and Rita stood and waved from the gift shop door. Ethan's arm was draped across her aunt's shoulder in a gesture so natural that Lainie felt as if a fist had grabbed her heart.

Her thoughts tumbled like dice, so engrossing her that she nearly missed the right turn into the gas station. Sharply, she pulled the wheel of the old bike and veered into the driveway. However, as she hit the brakes, she went into a jackknife that sent her flying to the ground.

Her instinct was to jump right up, but her pant leg was tangled in the gear chain and her right ankle throbbed.

"Didn't you hear me call you?"

She shielded her eyes from the bright sun and looked up to find the motorcycle mechanic, looking—if possible—even more golden than he had the night before. He wore a pair of blue gym shorts, running shoes, and a very wide smile.

He held out his hand to help her but she stubbornly pushed herself up from the ground, wincing as her sore ankle took the weight.

"Didn't you hear me call you?" he asked again as she bent over the front wheel. "I was out running and I could see that wheel wobbling a block away."

She looked up at him, shocked as she had been the night before by the blueness of his eyes. She knew those eyes: They were Ethan's.

"No, I didn't hear you. And it wasn't the wheel. I got my jeans caught in the chain."

He chuckled. It had an easy sound. His eyes swept her body, from moccasined feet to flushed face, a slow grin splitting his face. A warmth like the one she'd experienced in her dream spread through her as she saw the way his eyes lingered on her curving hips and waist. Her T-shirt suddenly felt too tight and her rib cage incapable of containing her heart.

To break the spell, she leaned over to lift the bike up by the handlebars, but he beat her to it.

"You ripped the hem of your pants," he said, his blue eyes sparkling their way across her face.

She nodded, almost angry because of her desire to plunge her hands into his thick tangle of dark blond hair. "I *did* tell you I caught it in the chain, didn't I?"

His glance took in her outfit. "That could have been avoided," he said. "Less clothing, more skin." His slightly off-center grin made his eyes crinkle.

She narrowed her gray eyes at him in a scowl. "I should ride around half-naked, for heaven's sake?" She pointed to his shorts. "I suppose you wear those to be practical?"

"Do my shorts bother you?"

Her scowl intensified. "Of course not."

"Then why are you frowning?" His grin widened. "Does my *body* bother you?"

She met his laughing eyes with her own cool ones. "I'm used to nude men, thank you. I'm an—"

He started to laugh, head thrown back.

"I'm an artist," she said loudly, wishing that the ground would swallow her. "I meant I'm used to statues—"

Seeing her embarrassment, he reached out and touched her shoulder lightly with one hand. "I wasn't laughing at *you*," he said. "It was that defiant look on your face when you said you're used to naked men. I'm sorry."

"You should be." The touch of his hand had softened her angry embarrassment. He smiled and suddenly she found herself laughing.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot last night," he said. "Care to try again?"

"Definitely." She extracted her right hand. "Lainie Randall, klutz par excellence." She nodded at the bike, then her torn jeans.

His hand, large and warm, enveloped hers.

"Matt Ward, exhibitionist par excellence," he answered with a glance at his shorts.

"You're the son with the Master's in history?"

"I'm the only son Ethan has."

Her surprise was still visible in her widened eyes.

"Don't tell me," he said. His voice was flavored, she realized, with a touch of New England. "You had me pegged for just a mindless jock, right?"

"No, no, not exactly." She stammered, then stopped and looked into those blue eyes. "You're right," she admitted with a good-natured shrug. "I'm guilty of sexism, aren't I?"

He glanced at her as he leaned the bike against the gas station wall. "Sex object?" he asked with a leer.

The heavy footsteps of an overweight young mechanic made them turn toward the repair bays. "Saved by the bell," she muttered as Matt stepped back so she could handle her business in private.

As it was, her business could have remained public, for, no more than two minutes later, she walked slowly down the driveway, favoring her sore ankle. Matt was doing stretching exercises near the curb.

"Any luck?" He wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. "Your car ready?"

She made a face. "No luck at all. It won't be ready until Monday morning. They can't get one of the parts for the muffler. It's a 'sixty-nine Camaro."

He nodded. "No wonder—an oldie."

She frowned. "A classic, if you don't mind."

He bowed. "A point well taken. I favor classics myself."

"Cars or women?" The words were out before she could trap them.

"Both." He laughed at her blush. "Rita sold her Oldsmobile, didn't she?"

She nodded. "Last week. Otherwise she would have helped me out."

"Come on," he said. "I'm going to sit you down with a cup of coffee and we'll figure out how to get you where you need to go."

She felt a warm hand slide under her elbow and propel her toward a coffee shop a few blocks away.

"You don't have to do this," she said, but the look on his face silenced her.

"I have nothing better to do with my time. Besides," he said, "if we're going to be relatives, we might as well learn to like one another, right?"

*

ONCE the waitress had taken their order, Lainie leaned back against the bench seat and trained her gray eyes directly on Matt.

"Okay," she said, "I think a few explanations are in order."

He grimaced. "I really blew it, didn't I? Rita must have been saving the announcement for dinner tonight. I'm sorry."

Lainie sighed. "I'm not," she answered. "I think I know what it's about, but you tell me."

"My father and Rita are getting married," he said, unable to stop the grin that broke like lazy sunshine across his tanned face. "I never thought it would happen, but they're tying the knot."

She knew a smile was expected of her, murmurs of "Isn't-it-wonderful-I'm-sure-they'll-be-happy," but she simply couldn't manage it.

"Lainie? Did you hear me?" He lightly touched her hand.

"I heard you," she answered. "I just—I'm surprised."

He narrowed his eyes. "I think it's more than that," he said, shaking pepper onto his tuna sandwich. "You don't care for Ethan, is that it?"

"No, not at all. I met Ethan this morning and he seems like a lovely man. It's just—"

"What is it?" he pressed.

She sighed as she drizzled catsup on top of her cheeseburger.

"Matt, it's not *who* she's marrying, it's that she's marrying at all. She's lived a marvelous, independent life for years. She has her own business, she travels, has friends all over. Why would she want to settle down?"

He spread his hands wide. "Love, loneliness—all the traditional reasons."

"Rita's not lonely," Lainie said. "She's too busy."

"You sound like you're not high on marriage," he said.

She looked at him with level gray eyes. "I've seen too many bad ones in my day."

"Your own, perhaps?"

She raised a brow. "That's a very personal question. But, yes, I was married."

"Recently?" he asked.

"Yes and no—he left me six years ago, but didn't bother to sign the divorce papers until the year before last."

Matt's jaw hardened. "Responsible type, huh?"

She was surprised to see anger in his face. "I knew it when I married him," she said. "We were very young and we married for all the wrong reasons. I wanted security. Eric wanted a meal ticket who wouldn't mind sharing the stage with other women."

"I'm sorry," Matt said.

She forced a smile. "That's all right," she said. "It hurt like hell at the time, but Rita helped me get back on my feet."

He nodded. "I knew you'd lived with her for a while. How long?"

"I stayed there a year. She helped me get a job with an advertising company and I finished my art degree at City College. Then I got an apartment and—"

"You put yourself through college?" he asked.

"The last two years, yes. I had just finished my sophomore year when Mother died, then my stepfather, George,

transferred to the Philippines and took his darling daughters two months later."

Matt shook his head. "The bastard."

Lainie looked at him. "Not really. He settled a year's tuition and rent on me—to be honest, I didn't expect even that."

He changed the subject.

"So," he said, smiling, "let's get down to business. Where do you have to go this afternoon?"

She was grateful for his sensitivity and more than happy to talk about her work in stained glass and describe the supply house near Lancaster where she had hoped to shop.

Then, "Thanks for the thought," she said, "but I don't think your motorcycle could hold all the things I need."

He dismissed that with a wave of his large hand. "The bike's still on the disabled list," he said. "My car's just a couple of blocks from here." He grinned. "I'm not a total pagan."

"Just because you drive a cycle doesn't mean you're a pagan, does it?"

"You don't sound too sure," he said. "Most people have a terrible opinion of bikers, though we've begun to be socially acceptable since the gas crunch. Getting a hundred miles per gallon makes the idea quite appealing."

"Is that why you ride?"

"No," he said, thinking of how the aloneness of biking helped him forget.

There was an awkward silence.

"How did your motorcycle break down?"

Matt looked away. "I have a habit of taking my aggressions out on the speed track near York, and now and then the bike and I part company."

How could he seem so casual about it when it had probably resulted in that large scar on his shoulder?

"I must say, you seem obsessed with that thing," she said as they left the restaurant. "I'm like that about my work. In the year or so I've been free-lancing, I don't think I've taken more than three days off."

"So this will be a vacation for you?" he asked as they turned into the lot where he'd left his car.

"Not really. Rita must have taken twenty-five orders for me, including one for the hospital solarium."

"I'm impressed," he said, stopping in front of a red Thunderbird, his face flowing with unmistakable pride of ownership as he unlocked the door.

Lainie stared at the car. It was old—at least a 'sixty-five, but in perfect condition. It gleamed with the sheen of loving attention.

"Oh, Lord." She sighed. "It's fantastic."

He opened the door and she slid into the curving cream-colored bucket seat. He slipped into the driver's side and inserted the key. "It's a 'sixty-four," he said. "One of the ones like they don't make anymore."

She groaned. "I'll sure never let you see my car. I have a 'sixty-nine and it looks like it carried troops in World War Two. What's your secret?"

"There's no secret," he said. "Just patience and hard work. I love the old cars and this year I had nothing better to do than restore one. It was either that or—" he stopped.

She looked at him in profile. His strong jaw had turned granite hard, and a small muscle twitched in his right cheek. She wondered if he was referring to an operation or accident that had produced the scar on his shoulder, but her natural reserve kept her from asking.

He reached over and turned the radio to a station that played songs of the sixties.

She laughed. "Old cars, old music—it's not hard to see why you're a history buff. What do you think you'll do with your Master's?"

"That's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question," he answered. "It all depends...."

TIME HAD JUST slipped away from her. The pleasures to be found in Arthur's Art Supplies were just too seductive for her to resist. Finally, a little after three-thirty, she wheeled a fully loaded shopping cart into the parking lot.

She couldn't see Matt behind the wheel of his T-bird and wondered if he was stretched out in back taking a nap.

However, as she walked up to the car, she heard the thud-thud of running steps and turned to see him, bare-chested and in shorts once more, loping toward her. He carried a small brown paper bag.

"I'd given up on you," he said as he halted in front of her.

"I lost track of time," she explained as he unlocked the huge trunk and helped her load her supplies. Then he withdrew two enormous peaches from the paper bag.

He grinned and held out the fruit.

Lainie smiled back, aware of a curiously light feeling in her chest as she took one of the ripe-to-bursting peaches.

As she sank her teeth into the fruit, an explosion of sweet, sun-warmed juice spilled out across her lips and trickled down her chin. Laughing, she wiped at her face.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"It's fantastic—practically tree-ripened."

Matt laughed. "It is tree-ripened. There's a farm down the road where you can pick your own."

"You're a nice man, Matthew Ward," she said. "Thank you."

He shrugged. "What can I say? It must run in my family."

She finished her peach, then watched him finish his. A thin trickle of juice had run down his chin and a few drops were glittering on his chest. She had a sudden urge to place her mouth against his skin and taste it. The desire was so overwhelming that she quickly turned and walked away under the premise of looking for a place to dispose of the pit.

"It's biodegradable," Matt said. "Just toss it into the bushes where birds can get it."

He extended his left hand with his own red peach pit in it for hers, took a step back and hurled the refuse into a row of bushes some hundred yards away.

Lainie whistled. "Great throw," she said. "You should have been in the major leagues."

A frown flickered across his handsome face. "I was."

Lainie's face split into an enormous grin. "That's unbelievable! I've never met a real, live ball player before—I thought you looked like an athlete."

"Recuperating athlete," he said, touching the scar on his left shoulder. "Eight months ago I couldn't even lift my arm."

"Did you hurt yourself on the field?"

He nodded. "Yep. Had to have rotator cuff surgery. That ended my second season with the Red Sox."

She groaned in sympathy. "Were you good?"

He laughed. "They called me Bat Man."

"The Bat Man?"

He nodded.

"You played against the Yankees a couple of years ago in the play-offs?"

He nodded again. "And I'll bet you're a Yankees fan, right?"

"Fanatic is more like it." She smiled. "That makes us natural enemies, you know."

"I've noticed," he answered. "Do you think we can overcome our predestined rivalry and become friends?"

Inexplicably, she felt the breath catch in her throat. "We can try." She extended her hand.

LAINIE STOPPED at the landing, smoothing out the skirt of her black dress and shaking her head to feel the reassuring tap of her earrings against her cheeks. Those gold hoops were the first present she had ever bought herself—after all

Eric's bills had been paid. To her, they symbolized success and independence.

She was filled now with a delightful tension as she walked into the room.

"Lainie, dear, you're just in time." Rita stood behind the bar in the far corner of the narrow living room. She wore a vibrant scarlet silk dress. "Care for a cocktail?"

Before Lainie could answer, Ethan rose from the sofa.

"You look stunning, Lainie," he said as he walked toward her. "I'd say our gain is definitely my son's loss."

Lainie glanced at Rita who was beaming at them, and tried to disguise her disappointment.

"A martini, Lainie?" Rita asked.

Lainie shook her head. "I still haven't acquired a taste for them, Rita."

Rita groaned. "Don't tell me you still like those ghastly concoctions that come with paper parasols?"

Lainie laughed and nodded, turning to Ethan to explain. "I'm not crazy about the taste of liquor, so drinks have to be well disguised."

Rita poured her a glass of club soda with a twist.

When the three of them had their drinks firmly in hand, Lainie rose, then raised her tall glass high.

"A toast," she said, looking from Ethan to Rita. "To my aunt Rita. Thank you for teaching me how to stand alone without fear."

A flicker of concern passed across Rita's face. Ethan just nodded and sipped his martini.

"A valuable lesson, that," he remarked as he stood up. "Now it's my turn." He extended one hand and drew Rita closer to him.

Lainie swallowed. Thanks to Matt, she knew what was probably going to be announced and she prayed all her misgivings wouldn't show.

Ethan raised his glass and bowed in Lainie's direction. "To you, Lainie Ran-

dall. I am looking forward to getting to know you better."

There was an almost palpable silence in the room. So they weren't going to make the announcement now, Lainie thought as she put her glass down and enveloped the two of them in a hug.

For a moment, she felt burdened with an insight she'd never wanted. Rita had never married, had never opened her life up to a man as she was about to do with Ethan.

But Lainie had. Did Rita know how vulnerable she was making herself?

*

LA MASCOTTE was a charming French restaurant just two miles outside town. A maitre d' had escorted Lainie, Ethan and Rita to a table near a window that overlooked a small duck-filled pond. Strings of tiny white lights in the branches of a weeping willow above the water tossed crystal reflections into the night sky.

After their tulip-shaped glasses had been filled with champagne, Ethan raised his.

"Matt asked me to order this with his compliments. Welcome to Gettysburg, Lainie."

The wine bubbled against her lip and made her smile. Suddenly champagne seemed a marvelous idea—it made her effervescent, ebullient.

"Your son has marvelous taste in champagne," Lainie said as she took another sip. She raised the glass. "To Matthew," she said. "Wish you were here."

"He will be," Rita said. "He's joining us later."

"This champagne really is marvelous," Lainie repeated, an enormous grin wreathing her face. "Do you think Matt will get here in time for dinner?" she asked casually as she opened the menu.

Ethan's face grew serious. "He fixed that damned motorcycle and took it out about an hour ago." He shook his head.

Rita patted his arm. "Don't worry. He's probably just testing it."

Ethan laughed but without humor. "Probably," he said. "Just getting it ready for his next act of stupidity."

Rita turned to Lainie.

"Matt was injured at the end of last year—he plays baseball with the Red Sox."

Lainie nodded. "I know. He told me. He was one heck of a good outfielder, wasn't he?"

"Series MVP his rookie year," said Ethan.

"Matt's been having a difficult time since the accident," Rita explained. "I don't think he's ever forgiven his body for betraying him."

Ethan took a long sip of champagne. "Things have always come easy for Matt. Since he was a little boy, his body was his ticket to success. Any sport, he only had to be shown how once. Now he pushes his body to the limit, lifting weights, running, riding that damned motorcycle, trying to prove he's still in control. Yet, when it comes to baseball, he can't even sit and watch a game on TV. I don't know if he'll ever adjust to being out of it."

Lainie had a sudden rush of empathy for him.

"What about the Master's degree in history?" she asked. "What's he going to do with it?"

Ethan spoke again. "I hope he'll settle down somewhere and think about teaching. He has a fine mind and a real love for the subject. At least it will last longer than a career in pro sports."

They grew silent, turning to the list of entrées.

It was no use. Lainie sighed and closed the menu.

"I'm out of my element," she said. "Would one of you choose for me? But not seafood."

Her aunt chuckled and turned to Ethan. "Lainie is what we fondly call a junk-food addict."

"I can't deny it," she said when Ethan pursued the topic after ordering sole meunière for himself and Rita and chicken Dijonnaise for Lainie. "My idea of culinary paradise is a Big Mac and a glass of this delightful champagne."

"I admire a woman who knows what she likes."

Three heads swiveled in the direction of the deep male voice. Matt stood by the table. A warm glow spread through Lainie as she admired the lean, hard physique clad in a lightweight cream-colored suit. His shirt was of toasted almond and a linen tie picked up the peachy undertones of the suit. His dark blond hair gleamed like burnished gold.

"Glad you could make it," Ethan said as he stood and shook Matt's hand. He called the waiter over and Matt ordered filet mignon with *duxelle* sauce. "With a Caesar salad for two, please." He turned to Lainie. "Will you share it with me?"

She nodded mutely. "That's all. *Merci*," he said.

"Actually, would you make it a Caesar for four," Ethan chimed in. "I usually follow my son's lead in affairs of the stomach."

He poured Matt a glass of champagne and refilled the other three glasses. With a glance at Rita so tender and loving that it made Lainie feel like a voyeur, he raised his glass high.

"Another toast?" Lainie asked, not letting on she knew their secret.

Ethan nodded. "I'm very—" he looked at Rita "—actually, *we're* very happy to see you both here tonight because some things are best shared with family."

Lainie had to force herself not to glance at Matt.

Ethan theatrically cleared his throat. "It's my great pleasure to announce the wedding of Ethan Ward and Rita Randall on June eighteenth, and to request you, Matthew and Lainie, to be our witnesses."

Lainie found herself swept along on the golden champagne tide of excitement as they stood up. She hugged Ethan, Matt hugged Rita, Lainie and Rita embraced, Matt clasped his father's hand and clapped him on the back, then suddenly, unexpectedly, she found herself held in Matt's strong arms, her hands resting lightly on his back.

Then, abruptly, he tilted his head and kissed her on the cheek, pressing the fullness of his mouth to her flesh. As he straightened, his deep blue eyes blazed through the fog she floated in, and she understood that the questions ricocheting between them would soon demand answers.

"Welcome to our family," he said as he held her chair out for her.

"And welcome to ours," she responded lightly as the conversation turned to the wedding just one week away.

"What made you settle on the eighteenth?" Lainie asked.

"Since I had already made plans for Europe this summer, we decided what could be a better wedding trip than that," Rita answered. "Did I take you very much by surprise, dear?"

"I was very surprised," she said, aware of three pairs of eyes focused on her face. "I expect to hear all the details of this whirlwind courtship later on."

Much later that night, Rita and Lainie sat in the kitchen at home drinking coffee. "Go ahead," Rita said, smiling. "Ask all your questions."

"When?" Lainie asked. "Where? How come?" She shrugged. "Take your pick."

"Let me try to answer them in order," Rita said. "The 'when' was three weeks ago. Matthew showed up unexpectedly, a little shook up about his professional life, and Ethan invited him to stay until he got himself straightened out. I had already asked you to come, Ethan and I had planned this European vacation—here we were, with our families around

us, and, well, it just seemed the perfect time to get married."

Lainie shook her head. "That takes care of the 'where' and 'when.' I still want to know how come? You've been so independent, Rita—it's the finest gift you ever gave to me. I always admired the way you needed no one but yourself to have a happy life."

"If that's all I taught you, then I'm very sorry. I'm not saying self-esteem isn't vital. It is. But, it's not the sole ingredient." She took a long sip of coffee, her eyes intent upon Lainie, seeing not the twenty-nine-year-old in front of her, but the lonely young woman of six years ago who had to be made to understand that there was life after divorce.

"You keep forgetting the difference in our ages, Lainie. I'm fifty-two. When I was younger, women had to make choices with their lives. And I was going to have a career—" she sighed "—no matter what it cost me."

Lainie was quiet. Then, "You've been very successful, Rita," she said finally. "You were the finest buyer in all of Manhattan, weren't you?"

Rita gave a short, empty laugh. "I sure was, honey. And it cost me the man I loved. When you were just a baby, I was very much in love with a kind, wonderful man who wanted us to be married and raise a family."

"He didn't want a career-wife?" Lainie asked.

"It wasn't that," Rita answered. "He would have compromised. It was me. I saw my friends disappearing into marriages that were more like indentured servitude, and I panicked. It wasn't going to happen to me." She shook her head at the memory. "The reason I'm telling you all of this is because I feel I've been lucky. I've had two second chances in life—the first, when you came to me and I discovered just how it felt to be needed by another human being. You look at it as being in my debt, Lainie, but it's I who am indebted. To look at you

now, able to strike out on your own in the career you love, gives me a feeling of pride that surpasses any I've ever felt."

Lainie flushed. "And your *second* second chance?"

Rita met her niece's beautiful gray eyes with her own brown ones. "Ethan," she answered.

"Ethan! He was the one—?"

Rita nodded. "It's as if fate brought us back to where we began."

After Rita had moved to New York years ago, Ethan had taken a job in Boston where he fell in love with and married Sarah Ralston, who would be Matt's mother. They'd had a happy marriage, but three years ago Sarah had died of cancer.

Rita and Ethan had kept in touch via Christmas and birthday cards through the years, so that Rita knew about Sarah's death and Ethan knew Rita had made the move back to Pennsylvania. Ethan had retired early, and spent two years traveling the country until, upon the death of his eldest brother, he found himself back in Gettysburg as owner of the big yellow house of his childhood. His intention had been to settle the estate and sell the house, but he found himself back under the spell of the Pennsylvania countryside, and then in love again with Rita.

"It's like a fairy tale," Lainie said. "How incredible that you two should find yourselves back here and able to fall in love."

"I like the way you put that, 'able to fall in love,'" Rita said. "That's the key to it, Lainie. Years ago I wasn't able to fall in love with Ethan the way he deserved to be loved. I had too many conflicts." She smiled. "I had to learn to love myself before I could be free to love anybody else. That's the lesson you learned after your divorce."

Lainie looked at her, wishing she could get inside her mind and heart to understand more fully. She felt suddenly very

tired as they both stood up and put their cups in the sink.

"Well," she said, "I guess I have all this to look forward to in twenty years. Maybe we Randall women are just late bloomers."

Rita linked arms with Lainie as they headed up the staircase. "I wouldn't be so sure of that," she said as they parted at the door to the guest room.

LAINIE HAD heard the words before—even repeated them once herself. But, as she stood in Judge Abrams's book-lined study and listened to Rita and Ethan exchange the ancient, loving promises, she felt as if she were hearing them for the first time.

Because the wedding ceremony was in the judge's home, only four guests were present: Lainie and Matt, and Willie and Irma Wallace, the couple's closest friends. They formed a semicircle around the bridal pair who stood in the dappled sunshine that streamed through the windows.

Everything seemed magical, nearly mystical, to Lainie. She was surprised when the judge said, "I now pronounce you Man and Wife," that a rainbow didn't somehow arc across them at that exact moment.

Instead, there was a gentle explosion of joy: Rita's luminous beauty—the kind that requires seasoning by life and time—turned toward Ethan, then to Lainie, with a loving hug. Handshakes and kisses all around, then an exodus toward the cars and the reception at La Mascotte.

Matt held Lainie's arm with a firm pressure on her elbow. A warm breeze swirled the full skirt of her red gauze dress up around her knees, and the ruffles at the neckline gently brushed against her skin.

She kept her head slightly turned away for she knew her gray eyes sparkled with tears. They blurred her vision so she didn't see the sprinkler head in the grass. One high-heeled sandal caught for a sec-

ond and she stumbled, only to be caught and held by Matt.

"Come out of the clouds, Lainie," he said.

She looked up to thank him and was surprised by the redness of his eyes.

Impulsively, she touched a wet spot on his tanned cheek.

"What can I say?" He shrugged. "I'm a sucker for happy endings."

She wished with all her heart she could believe in them too.

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THE OWNER of La Mascotte led them to a lovely yellow room with a fireplace and marble mantel, white brocade couches by enormous French doors that opened on a patio overlooking the pond.

Rita and Ethan, posed formally before the open doors, smiled at them, and Lainie could hear the stream of chatter meant to relax them as Alex, the young red-haired photographer, bobbed around them snapping the pictures.

Finally he stopped long enough to change film, and Lainie and Matt walked over to the newlyweds.

"I hope you have enough film, Alex," Ethan said. "We want plenty of shots of this handsome young couple."

Rita drew her arm through Lainie's. "You look beautiful, dear." Her words drifted off as Lainie felt a hand on her waist. She knew by the slightly intimate pressure of fingers that it was Matt.

"Alex wants us to smile prettily for his camera," he said. "Think we can oblige him?"

She looked up at him, unable to disguise the twinkle in her deep gray eyes.

"I'm game if you are," she answered.

He draped his arm across her shoulders and softly, so only she could hear, he said, "I'm going to hold you to that later."

The camera caught her delicious shiver of anticipation, captured the half smile on her full lips.

"Fantastic!" Alex exclaimed, snapping frame after frame. "Sensational!"

Only she and Matt knew that it wasn't Alex's chatter and antics that had caused that look—it was something entirely different.

CHAMPAGNE had flowed, toasts had been offered, dinner thoroughly enjoyed. The sixty guests now milled around the U-shaped dining area, waiting for the dancing to begin.

Lainie stood next to Matt near the bar, sipping her second glass of champagne and listening to the eleventh person approach him to talk about his baseball future. The first eight times he had lightly fielded the questions, but by now his answers had grown clipped, less tempered with humor.

Finally, with a nod toward the burly red-faced man he had been speaking with for the last twenty minutes, he propelled Lainie out into the garden.

The sound of laughter from the dining room filtered out through the heat-buzzed air.

"I don't think we should stay out here too long," she said. "We have to be there for the first dance and the cutting of the cake."

"Ah, yes," he said. "The ceremonies."

"Now I see the plan," she said, trying gently to joke him out of his melancholy mood. "You'll do anything to get out of having to dance with me, is that it? Afraid I'll inflict some damage?"

He chuckled. "Not at all. But I am afraid if one more sports fan asks me when the hell I'm going back to work I might inflict some."

She took a deep breath. "People mean you no harm, Matt. Fans always think their heroes are private property."

He shook his head then pulled her a little closer to his side. The feeling of his large hand as it traced the curve of her shoulder beneath her hair was beginning to disorient her. Impulsively she reached

up and covered his hand with her own so the two rested firmly, comfortingly together on her shoulder. He entwined his fingers with hers, capturing them there.

Lainie was beginning to understand many things as they stood there beneath the willow. She felt a connection between them that had nothing to do with his arm around her or the feel of his hand beneath hers. She touched his shoulder. "I'm a good listener, if you feel like talking."

"Where were you two years ago?" he asked, half in jest. "Most people had forgotten me by the time I got out of the hospital."

"I'm here now."

"I know," he answered. "I'm glad. But what can I tell you? Two years ago I was riding high after that sensational World Series. I think I personally opened and closed every disco in every major league city we hit. I even believed my own press—all-powerful, indestructible, the golden boy." He grew silent, blue eyes darkening. "Then I slammed into the fence at Fenway Park during a game late last season and found myself with an arm that hung like stretched-out elastic." He sighed. "That's it. All those great friends, those loving women—gone by the time I left the operating room."

She squeezed his hand. "Are you still under contract?"

He nodded. "Two more years."

"Are you recovered enough to go back? Can you ever play again?"

A flicker of fear and uncertainty passed across his handsome face.

"The team doctors say I am," he replied, "but I know I don't have the control or power I used to have."

"You won't really know about that until you try, will you?" she asked.

He dragged his hand through his sandy hair. "Quiet," he said. "I'm trying to forget that."

"Matt! Lainie!" Irma's voice floated across the garden. "Come on! They're about to cut the cake!"

"We'd better go in," Lainie said.

He took her hand, raised it to his lips, then kissed the soft inside of her palm. Pulse points she never knew existed pounded and sent a warm tremble down her spine. She couldn't withhold a smile.

"What's so funny?" He clasped her hand.

"Your mustache. It tickles."

He looked down at her, his eyes growing deeper and bluer. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

"I WARNED YOU I'm not much of a dancer," Lainie said a few minutes later as Matt led her to the dance floor.

His right hand pressed firmly into the small of her back as he drew her close to him. He clasped her right hand in his left, and awkwardly, they started to move. She could feel eyes on them as she tried to keep the rhythms under control.

"Feel the music, Lainie," he murmured. "Just let it flow into you."

"Music doesn't flow into me, Matt," she answered. "It stops dead when it gets near my feet."

Matt tightened his hold on her and pulled her close until her breasts, covered only by the thin fabric of her red dress, were pressed against his chest and her head nestled just below his chin.

He moved his mouth closer to her ear. "Close your eyes and pretend we're alone," he said.

Every nerve in her body vibrated to the sound.

"Just feel the way my body moves and let yourself respond." He paused for a moment. "Actually, it's a lot like making love."

Her head shot up.

He grinned.

For the first time she noticed the dimple in his chin. His eyes twinkled at the heat that had suddenly—visibly—stained her face and throat.

"I was only speaking figuratively," he said. Then, in a softer tone, added, "Unfortunately."

The simple act of dancing had been turned upside down, changed by his seductive words into a sensual delight. Her legs had molded themselves against Matt's, moving with the insistent sinuous pressure of his hard muscular thighs.

"Look at me, Lainie," he said then, his voice low and urgent. "Let it happen. Don't put a wall up between us again."

She was unable to hide the feelings of desire and fear that sparked from her eyes, not even sure if she wanted to hide any longer.

"I'm not the only one who's put up barriers, Matt," she said.

Neither one was aware that the music had stopped or that they were alone in the center of the dance floor, arms around one another, swaying back and forth to a very personal rhythm. Fortunately, most people were occupied finishing their wedding cake and coffee. However, near the double doors that led into the private anteroom, Rita and Ethan stood watching them, their faces filled with surprised pleasure.

Matt propelled them across the dance floor toward the couple so rapidly that she had to break into a trot to keep up with him.

Lainie, suddenly filled with a bubbling sense of elation, linked arms with both Rita and Ethan. Matt was mesmerized by the way all the light in the room seemed to be reflected in her golden earrings, in her silver eyes.

"Isn't it time you two got your show on the road?" he asked the newlyweds. "If you're going to get to Harrisburg International for the ten o'clock shuttle, you'd better shove off."

Ethan checked his watch. "You're right, son. I lost track. I'd better call a cab."

"No way. I'll drive you," Matt said.

Rita pulled his head down a little so she could kiss his cheek. "That's too long a drive, honey," she said. "We'll take a cab."

He grinned at her. "What if I bring Lainie along as navigator and promise not to break any speed limits on the way?"

Rita shrugged. "You win," she said. "But you may wish you'd lost when you see our luggage."

IT WAS WELL AFTER midnight when Matt pulled the Thunderbird into the driveway of Rita's home. Lainie was sleeping quietly in the passenger's seat, her face buried in his cream-colored jacket.

Watching Lainie sleep, he felt painfully aware that if he were to get involved with her, it would mean lowering some of the barriers he'd worked so long to construct. If he tried to reenter the Majors and failed or—worse—was injured again, how would she react?

With a sharp click, he shut the engine off.

"Wake up, Lainie."

She opened her eyes at the sound of Matt's voice and covered a yawn with the back of her hand. "I dozed off?" she asked lazily. Matt nodded. Her easy smile faltered as she saw how his blue eyes seemed once again curtailed. "Come in for some coffee," she said.

"Thanks, but no." *Damn it.* His voice was more gruff than he'd intended. "Time to call it a night."

She found herself babbling on about how she wanted to sleep late the next morning, then spend the day getting to work on the hospital skylight. Finally, Matt got out of the car and helped her out.

"It was a lovely wedding," she said.

"It was."

She nodded at him, then turned to head up the walk to Rita's house, stopping at the sound of Matt's voice.

She turned. "Did you say something, Matt?"

He stood there, leaning against the car with his arms folded across his chest, and shook his head. It took all of his strength

to keep from striding up the walk and taking her into his arms.

"Sleep well, Lainie."

IT WAS NO USE!

Lainie pushed her black marking pen across the tiny worktable and crushed the sheet of drawing paper into a ball. It was the day after Ethan and Rita's wedding and for three hours she'd been working on the master outline for the hospital skylight. She had gotten precisely nowhere.

She retrieved some of the discarded drawings, smoothing out the crumpled papers to see if she could salvage any of her designs—anything to take her mind off Matt and the disturbing memory of his touch.

She knew the skylight was to measure three and a half by four feet eight inches, knew the hospital wanted a design in tranquil shades of blue and green. She knew the specifics, the materials needed, and now she also knew that the ideas that had bounced around her brain for days would never translate to paper.

A coil of restless tension vibrated through her body, coupled with a gnawing hunger. With one swift move, she scooped all the sketches up and tossed them into the wastebasket.

Then she hurried upstairs and yanked off her jeans and T-shirt to slip into a pair of crisp white pants and a green and yellow Hawaiian-style shirt. Before she could change her mind, or spend one more minute praying for the phone to ring, she grabbed her car keys and fled the quiet house.

Half an hour later, Lainie stood near the entrance inside the Dutch Inn. A hostess led her to a small booth in the back of the family-style restaurant and Lainie settled herself on the hard bench seat. The late afternoon sunshine from the window at her back was welcome against the air-conditioning.

The place was abuzz with conversations; each booth and table overflowed

with fathers, mothers, and children, tourists, grandparents, every combination imaginable. She was glad to be in the rear of the restaurant, glad she had an enormous plastic menu to duck behind. Back in Manhattan, it never bothered her to dine alone. Maybe it was yet another aftereffect of the wedding yesterday. Whatever it was, she had never felt more solitary in her life.

A teenage waitress took Lainie's order for salad and a bowl of soup, then hurried off toward the kitchen. Lainie was about to go to the salad bar when she heard a familiar voice at her side.

"You're not an easy woman to find."

She stared up at Matt for a moment, as if she weren't quite sure it was he. "I didn't know I had to check in with anyone," she answered.

"Come with me." He took her hand.

"Sorry, but I've already ordered. You should have phoned me."

"Couldn't," he said. "Your phone's out of order."

"Perhaps we could have coffee later," she said. "Right now, I intend to have my dinner."

His grip tightened. A thrill of alarm mixed with excitement shot through her.

"Let go of me, Matt." Her voice was low and controlled. "Let's not cause a scene."

"I damned well *will* cause a scene if you don't come with me." His voice was calm.

"The waitress is bringing my soup," she said with a forced smile so the girl would think nothing amiss. "If I have to pay for the meal, I intend to eat it."

He reached into his back pocket.

"That should do it." He smiled at the young waitress who stared at a twenty dollar bill and the blond hunk who had just told her to "keep the change."

Lainie's heart pounded as they hurried out of the restaurant and Matt propelled them toward his T-bird, parked next to her Camaro.

She yanked her hand away from his and was about to grab her car keys when she saw the strange look in his eyes.

He reached her in two steps, and pulled her close to him until her breasts grazed his chest. She looked up at his mouth lowered onto hers.

"I should have done that last night," he said when he finally raised his head. "I wanted to, you know."

Her hands trembled as he took them between his own.

"Why didn't you?"

A kaleidoscope of expressions flickered across his face. "Because, frankly, lady, you scare the hell out of me."

She must have started violently because his grip tightened. Scare *him*? When she felt as if her world were being turned upside down?

"Matt—" she began.

"Later." His voice was a low growl as he closed the few inches between their mouths once more, his arms curving around her body. This time there was nothing tentative or questioning in his touch. The softness of their lips as they came together in gliding contact played against the maddeningly sensual tickle of his mustache against her skin.

His tongue slid across her lips, parted them, then traced the slick surface of her teeth. She gasped at the cool sweetness of his mouth. Her tongue sought his, emboldened by the way his torso melted against hers until she could feel the heat of his desire.

"I think we're in trouble," he said finally, his voice light yet betraying his emotions.

She nodded, feeling very serious. "I think so."

"You know," he said, "all night long I wondered if I'd imagined everything. Maybe it was the spell of the wedding, the champagne—there had to be some reason why I couldn't sleep. But every time I closed my eyes, there you were in that red dress." He shook his head. "I don't know what's happening, Lainie, but I do

know I can't let you out of my sight tonight."

His honesty stunned her. He had said all she felt but lacked courage to reveal.

She touched his cheek, caressing the strong curve of his jawline.

"I don't want to be out of your sight tonight, Matthew."

The look of happiness on his face was almost painful to see. Never in her life had she felt more the focus of another's life.

"Will you come back to the house with me?" he asked. "I'll add dinner as an incentive."

Her heart seemed to flop over inside her chest.

THE LIVING ROOM of the big yellow house was as open and airy as an outdoor garden. Despite the thick humidity outside, the room was sweet and cool, shaded front and back by enormous oaks. Thick celery-green carpeting set off the pale yellow sofa and chairs to perfection.

Matt was in the kitchen mixing drinks for them, and Lainie was enjoying the opportunity to get a sense of how he lived, who he was. Now the sunset made the cream-colored curtains seem orange as the light streamed through.

"I hope you like piña coladas."

She turned to see Matt with two tall frosted glasses and took one from him, swirling the pineapple stick around. "This looks marvelous."

He raised his glass. "To us," he said, clicking glasses with her. "To the future."

She took a sip and smiled. "To now."

She didn't want to think about any time but the present. She wanted no summer promises that turned dry and brittle come fall.

He switched on the stereo and the lush sounds of a romantic ballad filled the air. He put his glass down.

"Care for another dancing lesson?" he asked.

She walked into his arms. "I'd love it."

"Lean into me," he murmured against her ear as they moved to the music. "Just let your body respond to mine."

His words ended the feeling of calm inevitability that had been with her since they got to Ethan's. She became unbearably aware of the way her right leg was pinned between his, of how his strong thighs flexed as they moved. Her nose was buried at the hollow of his throat and his scent made her feel giddier than the champagne the night before. She was rocked by a wave of desire, an intense need to feel his lips on hers.

She looked up at him, her gray eyes dark.

"Lainie?" he asked softly. She nodded.

Matt's hands, sure and supple, untied her midriff blouse and slid up her rib cage until she thought she would scream if he didn't caress her more fully. She gasped as his fingers touched the lacy cup of her yellow bra. He undid the front clasp and the frilly garment opened to expose her to his fiery, magical hands.

She unbuttoned his gauze shirt, her long fingers skimming over the light gold curls on his broad chest. Her hands trailed down, lower and lower. She drew one nail gently across his abdomen, smiling as the muscles twitched convulsively beneath her touch.

He bent his head and teased the dark area around her right nipple with his moist tongue. She placed one hand at the back of his neck and caressed it as his mouth, demanding yet loving, turned her nipple to diamond hardness.

The sensation was so overwhelming that her knees buckled. Matt swept her up into his arms as if she were a rag doll and carried her up to his bedroom on the second floor. He placed her in the middle of the double bed, then eased himself down next to her, pressing his long length against hers. He kissed his way along the cleavage between her breasts and up her smooth tanned throat until she thought she would burst from the

thrilling feelings that made her body glow.

Her long hair spilled across her right breast, its blackness startling against the deep peach color of her skin. He wrapped its silky length around his hands, then buried his face in its fragrant mass. In that second, the complexity of what he was feeling for her threatened to overwhelm him: He wanted her beauty, her intelligence, the solitary strength visible in her clear gray eyes. He wanted to drown himself in the sensation of loving her.

"Matthew," she murmured, her voice trembling, "make love to me."

The sound of her softly husky voice repeating his name was an aphrodisiac that excited him past reason. His mind wanted to prolong their anticipation but his body threatened to thwart his plans.

Her hands fumbled with the buckle to his jeans. "I feel so clumsy," she said. "I can't open this."

He smiled. "It always catches."

Matt helped her, then, raising his hips, pulled his jeans and briefs off and tossed them to the floor.

The sight of him nude and fully aroused excited her as nothing in her life before. She felt the rapid pulsing of his heart as she pressed kisses against his chest.

Her hands slid over his buttocks, over his slim waist, then trailed down over his flat belly, everywhere but the one male place she desired. As much to tease herself as to prolong his tension, she touched and kissed every other part of him but.

He tossed her clothes on a low chair across the room and she sat up in order to slip out of her bra and panties, but he pushed her back down against the mattress.

"Let me look at you," he said. "God knows I've imagined this moment a thousand times. Let me enjoy every part of you—slowly."

Her eyes darkened to the color of molten steel as she quivered visibly be-

neath his gaze. His fingertips traced a line from her knee, up along her slim thighs, then slid beneath the opening to her panties to where he found her as eager for him as he was for her. He wanted to be part of her, to own her body for a moment the way he wanted to own her heart.

"I can't wait any longer for you," he murmured against the soft skin of her thigh.

She cradled his head in her hands. "Matthew, I'm not— I mean I didn't expect to..."

He understood. "I'll take care of it."

Moments later, he stripped her of the lingerie and, with a muffled groan, lowered his muscular body on top of hers. She could feel his power pressed against her and she gasped, only to find his mouth covering hers in a drugged kiss. Her hips began to move in an age-old rhythm and, in one fluid motion, she was encircling his male warmth with her body, ignited by wild desire to ease the ache inside.

He pressed his mouth to the warm underside of her breasts. "So soft, so beautiful..."

As his words of praise penetrated her sensuous fog, she felt suddenly graceful and daring, aching as much for his fulfillment as for her own.

Matt's breathing became a series of sharp staccato bursts that sent shivers of delight coursing through her body. She moved beneath him, matching his power with her strength, his tenderness with her desire.

Finally, as he cupped her face with his hands and called out her name, she felt herself explode into a thousand pieces of crystal, shattering diamond-bright, lighting the room with her glow.

THE ROOM was dark when Lainie awoke. It was after two o'clock a.m. On top of the armoire, she could make out the tray, with the remnants of wine and cheese on it, that Matt had brought up to the bedroom hours ago.

"Dinner," he had called it and they both laughed because food was the last thing either one of them had in mind. While she dozed after their first fast and passionate coupling, then their second, more languorous bout of lovemaking, Matt had gone down to the kitchen and arranged the tray. The sight of him, so undeniably masculine with a towel slung low around lean hips as he carried the food, had moved her to happy tears.

Even now as she gazed at him as he slept—moonlight outlining his strong, proud profile—salty tears again stung. At every turn he not only met her expectations but surpassed them.

She hadn't planned on this, hadn't wanted to find herself here like this. How easy it would be to lose sight of the end of the summer, to forget that relationships end, that not everyone was as lucky as Rita and Ethan.

Matt sighed and turned toward her, his sleep-heavy arm settling possessively around her body. He looked different when he slept. The lines of worry smoothed out and he looked younger, more carefree. A peaceful, easy feeling poured over her like warm, sweet honey and she drifted back to sleep, a willing captive cradled in his arms.

*

MATT GRINNED and eased his denim shirt off.

"I think I'd be better at this if I had a little music." He twirled the shirt, then tossed it at Lainie, who was sitting at the workbench he'd set up for her in the garage behind Ethan's house.

"Matthew," she said, unable to keep the laughter from her voice, "if you're going to be an artist's model, you'll have to learn how to behave."

His snug jeans rode low on his hips as he rotated his pelvis. "I think I'm a natural at this," he said, dancing toward her.

"Maybe you've missed your calling," she said dryly. "Now just forget I'm here

and go about your exercising while I sketch you."

Instead, he crossed the room and enveloped her in his strong arms. She put her hands on his chest and playfully tried to push him away.

"You're insatiable, Matthew," she said, her gray eyes twinkling.

"Maybe if you took me up on my offer, I wouldn't be," he said.

"I thought you weren't going to bring that up again." He had been asking her to move in with him since the night they became lovers.

"Wouldn't it be terrific to wake up together every morning?" he asked, his mustache tickling her ear. "If we go inside, I'll show you—"

A rush of pleasure dissolved her body.

"Your tactics are definitely unfair," she murmured. "Come on now," she said, gently pushing him away. "There are only two hours of daylight left." She touched his lips with her hand. "We'll have plenty of time to neck after dark, Mr. Ward."

He grinned and went over to his exercise equipment. A graduated set of chrome dumbbells rested in a wooden rack and a system of slides and pulleys was attached to the wall.

He stripped down to running shorts and sweatband, then grabbed a jump rope and started his aerobic warm-ups. Lainie began sketching him, trying to capture the powerful grace of his movements.

In the three weeks since she and Matt had become lovers, she found herself in the middle of the greatest creative cycle she'd ever tapped. She'd filled two sketchbooks with drafts of new stained-glass pieces and she'd completed all of the orders Rita had taken for her. Designs seemed to flow from her mind directly to the jewel-toned sheets of glass, exploding in a dazzling display. Whatever magic had happened, Lainie didn't know, but it was as if she had crossed into the dimension of texture, able to feel

emerald greens and turquoises, not simply see them.

The design for the hospital solarium's skylight was nearly finished and she felt it was her crowning achievement to date. She had come across a small pamphlet on Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs—the gaily painted round wooden signs that farmers used on homes and bridges and barns for decoration and good luck. She had translated their graceful curves into the centerpiece of a design that also used oak leaf and tulips, the signs for strength of mind and body and faith. She felt a deeper joy in this work than she had ever imagined possible. And, although she tried not to admit it, she felt a deeper joy in life itself.

Sometimes she felt her heart didn't really start beating each day until Matt showed up at the Fifth Wheel Gift Shoppe after his morning run with two coffees and a bag of jelly donuts for them to share.

Somehow they had managed to create an atmosphere between them that existed far from the real world. It would have been easy to pretend that it wasn't just a summer romance, that she didn't have to return to New York. She had to force herself to work it into their conversation from time to time, just to anchor herself in reality.

FORTY MINUTES later she was putting the finishing touches on one of the sketches of him while Matt leaned over her shoulder, sipping some iced tea.

"Are my legs really that skinny?"

"No," she answered, flipping her pad closed. "And your shoulders aren't that broad either."

He kissed the side of her neck. "You're getting cranky—it must be past your dinner time."

She laughed and stood up. "Oh, you think you know me pretty well, don't you, mister?"

Matt nodded. "Well enough to know you won't say no to Chinese food. How about we go to Hunan East tonight?"

"As much as I hate to prove you right, I'd love to go." She gave him a brief kiss, then rummaged in her bag for the car keys. "Give me half an hour to change, then—" She stopped as she found a folded piece of paper with the name "Mike Ortiz" written across it. "Oh, God, I completely forgot about this." She handed him the paper. "Your agent called early this afternoon. He left his number in Boston—said to tell you it's very important."

"Don't worry about it," Matt said brusquely. "With Mike everything is very important. He probably just wants to know when he gets his ten percent of this month's paycheck." He laughed. "Now get home and change, Randall."

She saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

There was something about his laugh that made her uneasy, though, that made her almost wish she hadn't found the note at all.

MATT WAS QUIET, contemplative almost, as they drove out of town in the big red Thunderbird. She closed her eyes as they worked their way south toward the restaurant near Hanover, and was deep in happy fantasy over Kung Pao chicken when Matt turned off the main road and eased the car along a rutted dirt road where he parked.

"What on earth are we doing here?" she asked.

"This is our first stop," he said as he led her along a rocky path edged with tall Queen Anne's lace and majestic tiger lilies that shivered in the hot early evening breeze.

"It's a very lovely spot, Matthew," she said, "but I hardly think I'm dressed for a nature walk." She gestured toward her dress and high-heeled sandals.

He grinned. "You're still cranky," he said. "The hunger pangs must be getting to you."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "It's just that we're all dressed up for dinner and you have us cavorting in the woods with a lightning storm on its way."

His eyes widened. "Lightning storm?"

She took a deep breath. "I can smell it."

He laughed. "That's a new one."

She stopped. "Take a deep breath," she said. "Can't you smell that strange tang?"

He took three deep breaths in rapid succession.

"Sorry," he said with a grin. "All I can smell is the apple orchards behind us."

They held hands as they walked alongside a stream. Then just ahead of them, straddling the stream, Lainie spotted a covered bridge.

"Oh, Matthew. It's magnificent. How did you ever find this?"

He stroked her hair. "We used to spend summers here when I was a kid and I considered this my secret hideaway. You're the first person I've ever brought here."

She had been about to make a joke, but the words died before they reached her throat.

"Thank you," she said instead. "I consider it an honor."

He chuckled. "Actually, this is quite appropriate." He pointed at the overhang above the entrance. "Covered bridges are supposed to be lucky for lovers."

Lainie moved toward the middle of the bridge to get a better look at the colorful wooden circle nailed high above the entrance. It was the first hex sign she had seen outside a photograph. Deep blue and vivid yellow rosettes were interspersed with plump red hearts and inverted blue and yellow triangles that edged the entire design.

"I love it," she said, wheeling to face Matt, "but it's one I've missed."

"This one guarantees love and romance to any couple who stand beneath it and kiss."

She laughed. "That sounds like mistletoe to me, Matthew. Are you making this up?"

"It does mean romance," he admitted, laughing with her. "I added the bit about kissing."

She grinned up at him. "I thought so."

A lovely shiver of pleasure rustled through her as she memorized the angles and curves of the design. Suddenly she saw her life as part of a larger design, each twist and turn bringing her closer to this moment, this man.

She moved away from Matt, running a hand along the wood walls which had faded to a shade of brick red.

He pointed toward the heavily wooded area beyond the pond. "Those woods are thick with game in the autumn. You'll love the way the trees change color—they look like living fire. Just wait until October."

She gently touched his arm. "I won't be here then, Matt. I go back to New York in five weeks."

Her words were stopped by the pressure of his mouth against hers. In the distance she could hear the low rumblings of thunder, as she wrapped her arms around his neck, running her fingers through his thick wavy hair.

His tongue drew hers into sensual battle, sliding up and down the long column of her tongue, drawing moans of pleasure from deep in her throat. But when a bone-crunching clap of thunder broke overhead, making the bridge vibrate, Lainie pulled her head away from his.

The rain began to fall in heavy silver sheets, obscuring their view of the Thunderbird. Then a dagger of lightning shot skyward with a hissing sound that made Lainie flinch.

"That's it," she said with a shudder. "This must be the worst place to be during a storm."

Matt looked out at the rain. "You're right." He took her hand. "We'd be better off making a run for the car—at least we'll be safer in there."

"Not to mention warmer," Lainie said.

Matt reached the car first and had the door open for her.

Lainie looked out the windshield at the violent streams of water that whipped against it. Matt slammed his door shut and she turned to look at him.

"Oh, Matt! You should see yourself," she said. "You're drenched."

He adjusted the rearview mirror for her. "And I suppose you're waterproof?" he asked with a laugh.

She looked at her reflection and groaned. "Oh, my God!" Smudges of kohl liner ringed her eyes and were threatening to trickle down her cheeks. "I look like a raccoon!" She put her hands over her face. "Don't look, Matt! Your illusions are about to be shattered."

He pried her hands away from her face, which was lovely to him even now. "I have no illusions about you, Lainie. I don't need any." He was unable to stop the words. "I love who and what you are."

"Oh, Matthew..." His words of love echoed in the isolation of the car and in her heart. And yet she was unable to repeat them back to him. The words she longed to say stuck in her throat.

He shouldn't have said it. He knew it even as the words had formed themselves. Don't push, he warned himself. Don't ask more of her than she's ready to give.

Wasn't it enough that she was here with him? Didn't the fact they were lovers tell him how she felt? Lainie thought.

But she couldn't even keep her mind on that for very long for Matt was kissing his way down the long column of her throat.

She unbuttoned his shirt and greedily her hands spanned his chest.

He groaned and, grasping both of her hands, pushed her back against the bucket seat.

"Fair warning," he said. "You keep doing things like that and you just might find yourself ravished in the back seat of a 'sixty-four Ford."

"That's one of life's pleasures that's eluded me," she said. "I wasn't that kind of teenager."

Matt stripped himself of his pale shirt and tossed it into the back seat. "Somehow I don't think you'll have any trouble now."

Lainie looked at him, wishing she could lose herself in the deep blueness of his eyes, the sweetness of his soul.

"Somehow I don't think so either," she said.

IT WAS AFTER dark by the time they cleaned the foggy windows and carefully made their way back to Ethan's house. They had decided against eating out.

Lainie followed Matt up to his room and waited while he searched out something clean and warm for her to wear. She had just slipped out of her dress when the hall phone rang.

"Would you get it?" Matt called from inside the walk-in closet.

She dashed into the hall in her slip and picked up the phone on the fifth ring.

"Good timing," said a deep, very New York voice. "I was about to hang up."

She hesitated a second. "Mr. Ortiz?"

"One and the same," he answered.

"Did Ward get my message?"

Matt had come into the hallway.

"Yes, Mr. Ortiz, I gave him your message."

Matt grimaced at the sound of his name.

"Call me Mike," the man said. "As long as Ward's using you as his buffer, we might as well be on a first-name basis, uh—?"

"Lainie Randall," she said. "Do you have another message for him?"

She heard a short grunt through the phone.

"You can tell Ward I know he's there," he said. "If he was trying to cover his tracks, he shouldn't have gone to his father's house. But here's the story. Foster in center field broke his leg. Matt's going to be in breach of contract if he doesn't show up by August first to get back in training. If he doesn't get his ass in gear pretty soon, he's gonna find himself up to his ears in legal fees—and I sure as hell don't want ten percent of those. Have him call me. He has the number."

Matt turned and stormed into the bedroom.

"There's a robe for you on the bed." He walked past her into the hallway.

"Where are you going?" Her voice was tight.

"I'm going out to get us pizza."

She grabbed his sleeve, feeling suddenly frightened by the distant look in his eyes. "Don't go," she said. "It's wicked out there. I'll make some scrambled eggs."

He pulled away from her and she saw the motorcycle keys in his hand.

"I have to get out for a while," he said.

She felt as if her nerves had been bathed in ice water. "You can't keep running away from it, Matt. Mike knows where you are. You're going to have to make a commitment."

He turned at the top of the staircase.

"That's a good one—you telling me I have to make a commitment. A little ironic, isn't it?"

His words stung, but she tried to keep her face calm. "What are you driving at, Matt?" she asked, knowing that her silence in the car had not gone unnoticed.

He moved down a step and looked up at her. "What I said to you in the car wasn't idle talk. I love you, Lainie."

There was a heavy silence.

"Matt, I—"

"Don't," he said. "'I love you' is a funny statement. If it's not immediately

followed by 'I love you, too,' it kind of loses its punch."

He turned and headed down the stairs with Lainie right behind him.

"Matthew, you're making this very difficult for me." She grabbed at his sleeve, stopping him near the door. "Don't you know how I feel? Do I have to say it?"

He pulled his arm away. "You don't have to say anything, Lainie. You say it every time you remind me you're here just for the summer."

A flame of anger erupted. "God, but you're unfair, Matt. How can I have a future with a man who has no idea what his own future will hold?"

He flung open the door and it bounced against the wall. Across the living room, Scooter groaned softly in her sleep.

The door slammed shut behind him.

BY THE TIME Irma Wallace came to work at one the next afternoon, Lainie was exhausted with worry. Each time the door opened and the bell chimed, she would jerk her head up, hoping for sight of Matt.

"Mrs. Hecht might be in for the mauve blanket," she said to the older woman.

Irma nodded, her pale blue eyes like sensors. "If you don't mind me saying so, Lainie, you look exhausted. The circles under your eyes have circles."

Lainie groaned. "Not you too, Irma. Everyone who's been here has been more than happy to tell me how tired I look. Maybe it's turning thirty."

"Don't tell me! Is today the big day?"

With a mock scowl, Lainie nodded. "Afraid so. My days of youthful innocence are officially over."

"Don't believe it," Irma said. "Take it from me—things only get better." She plopped two ice cubes into a glass of cold tea. "Did the storm keep you awake last night?"

Lainie nodded. "You could say that." The storm—and Matt's being out in it on that damned motorcycle—had filled her

night with bizarre dreams and unnamable fears that had left her as exhausted this morning as if she'd not slept at all.

She took a deep breath and picked up one of her drawing pens, allowing herself to sink deep within her imagination, where the images of Pennsylvania's deep jade hills and sweet-smelling orchards beckoned.

So it was with some irritation that she exclaimed, "What now?" when Irma hurried back into the workroom.

"Deborah James is outside to see you." Irma sounded conspiratorial, as if Lainie should leap from her seat at the sound of the name.

Instead, Lainie said, "And who is Deborah James?"

Irma hurried over, a whisper. "Didn't Rita tell you about her? Only Deborah James of the James Gallery in East-hampton. She's here to see some of your work."

Lainie sighed. Certainly none of her work, fine as it was becoming, could interest this Deborah James. However, since Rita had asked her to, she told Irma to show the woman into the workroom.

Deborah James was somewhere between thirty-five and fifty, a woman of impeccable grooming and sophistication. Her pale blond hair was swept smoothly off her face and her surprising golden brown eyes were both warm and assessing. She wore loose-fitting pants in a lightweight, nubby oatmeal-colored linen with a cool, open blouse of caramel-colored silk.

"And how are the newlyweds?" she said after Lainie motioned for her to sit down.

"I spoke to them this morning long-distance—they're doing London right now."

They chatted a few minutes longer about the wedding and all the attendant excitement, then Deborah James directed the conversation back to Lainie's stained-glass work.

"As Rita probably told you, I've been impressed with some of your works," Deborah said.

"Not the wind chimes, I'm sure," Lainie replied with a wry, self-mocking smile.

Deborah laughed. "You're right. They were terrific commercial pieces, but not exhibit quality."

Lainie absently riffled the pages of designs on the worktable in front of her. "I'm afraid I don't have much of anything that I would consider exhibit quality."

"Let me be the judge of that." Deborah slipped on a pair of glasses. "I hear you've been commissioned to do a big piece for the local hospital."

Lainie grinned. "The rumor mills seem to be busy."

"They usually are." Deborah returned the grin. "Believe me, all gallery owners pay heed to rumors about good work." She started looking at the detailed sketches Lainie had handed her. It seemed like hours before she looked up again.

"These are terrific." She was not a woman who wasted words. "Light-years past anything of yours I've seen before. Are any of these worked up yet?"

"Afraid not. I've been so busy filling smaller orders and working on the hospital piece that I—"

"The hospital piece. Can I see what you've done so far?"

Lainie picked up her car keys. "Let's go."

The sky was sharply blue and a cooling breeze fluttered the trees as they drove to Ethan's house. It was the kind of painfully lovely day that so often followed a violent storm. Scooter scampered around their feet, grateful for human company. The dog's actions only reinforced Lainie's feeling of emptiness when she realized that Matt wasn't there.

Deborah was very quiet as she inspected the nearly completed work before her. Finally, she turned, peering over

her narrow glasses with her eyes sparkling.

"Do you know what you've done here?" she asked.

Lainie swallowed. "I don't think I know what you mean."

Deborah removed her glasses and used them to gesture at the enormous stained-glass piece. "You've taken the leap. This may be commissioned for commercial use, but it's art. The way you've taken the Dutch hex signs and woven them into the design is masterful. Now, I know they mean good luck, but how do the others fit in?"

"The oak leaf is strength of mind and body, and the tulips are faith and trust."

Deborah's calm face split in a wide smile. "Better than I dreamed. Absolutely perfect for a hospital—all the attributes patients and their families pray for." Lainie was beaming. "And your use of color and form are marvelous, truly marvelous."

"I DON'T BELIEVE in beating around the bush," Deborah said when they sat down again at the gift shop. "I'd like to put you under contract to work exclusively for me for the next six months."

"Six months?" Lainie was uncertain. "Why?"

"I like what you're doing, but you need a little more direction, some more polishing. I'm associated with an architect near Lancaster who's working on a high-priced condo. He has plans to use a lot of original artwork—stained glass, especially, in the master bedrooms, skylights, room dividers and the like. We've been trying to find an artist who understands how to integrate the distinctive flavor of a region with their own private vision."

"But you said I need polishing."

Deborah laughed. "You do. And you'll get it. Lainie, I feel we both can benefit from the association."

"I don't know," Lainie said finally. "I have other commitments—this store, for

instance. Rita won't be back for another month or so. I have my apartment in New York, orders to fill...."

Deborah sighed. "I don't make the offer lightly, Lainie. If I didn't see tremendous talent, I wouldn't be here. But I have a business to run, and, if I may be blunt, there are many other young artists around." She handed Lainie her business card. "This is the twentieth. I need to know by the twenty-fifth." She stood up and shook Lainie's hand. "I hope the answer will be yes."

SINCE Deborah James's visit a few hours before, Lainie had been finding it hard to concentrate. The idea of committing herself to the condo project for six months seemed somewhat overwhelming. Twice she had picked up the phone to call Rita in London and ask for advice, and twice she put the receiver down.

No. It had to be her own decision. And deep down, she knew she had no choice but to accept the offer. Yet she wondered why she felt so curiously flat.

Matt. As usual, as it had been all summer, it was Matt. The strain of worrying over him these last eighteen hours was taking its toll.

She looked up as Irma came into the room.

"I hate to say it, Lainie," the older woman commented, "but you're not doing anybody one bit of good this afternoon."

Lainie sighed and leaned back in her chair, tossing her drawing pencil across the table. She drew a hand wearily across her eyes and tried to smile.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Irma asked. "You really do look pale."

Lainie was about to answer when the telephone rang.

It was Matt.

"Where are you?" *Why didn't you call?*

"I'm in Hanover, getting the bike fixed."

She flinched. "Are you all right?"

"Better than the bike," he answered.

His easy tone triggered a burst of anger fueled by the same worry that had just caused her relief.

"I'm sure that won't stop you from being a total ass again."

"Lainie, what's the matter? Listen, I meant to call sooner, but—look, I owe you a dinner from last night. How about it?"

"Thanks, but you don't owe me anything."

"Don't get your back up, Lainie, please. I apologize if my wording was clumsy." His voice became lower. "You have to eat," he urged. "I'll make dinner."

She relented. "What time?"

"Make it six-thirty," he said and hung up.

SHE TAPPED at the edge of the screen door and, from somewhere in the house, heard Scooter's excited yapping.

"Matthew?" She knocked again.

No answer. She tried the door and found it unlocked. She hesitated, then stepped inside the kitchen. She had been invited, after all.

The house was so quiet, even Scooter had calmed down. Had she gotten her times confused? she wondered as she reached the living room and saw what Matt had done.

Balloons in vivid reds and electric blues bobbed near the high ceiling. A poster-board sign, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, LAINIE," was taped to the mirror over the yellow sofa. Streamers fluttered in the breeze from the open windows.

And Matt stood there near the stereo, dressed in crisp chino pants and a dark turquoise polo shirt. He opened his arms to her, and after a second's hesitation, she walked into his embrace, feeling his kiss against her hair.

"Happy birthday," he said.

She smiled. "How did you know?"

He shrugged his wide shoulders, trying to look casual. "I called Rita in London and asked."

His words caressed her. "Are you really as nice as this, Matt? Most people don't care the way you do."

He hugged her. "Most people don't have you to care about."

She glanced away with that involuntary gesture he'd come to know.

"Listen—geez—" he searched for the right words—"you shouldn't have gotten the flak from Mike's phone call. I should've taken the call. I'm sorry."

Their argument had been about much more than that, yet neither one of them seemed willing to take it any further. For Lainie it was enough to be in his arms again.

He brushed a kiss against her ear. "I wish it were the beginning of the summer," he murmured.

Lainie pressed her lips against his neck. "I wish it were September," she said, trying to keep the smile from her voice.

He stiffened. "Can't wait to get out of here, huh?"

Lainie stroked his cheek.

"Can't wait to begin working here," she said, and grinned. "I've decided to take on a six-month project for a condominium in Lancaster. I'll be here into the spring."

The fire that blazed in his blue eyes was worth even the argument of the night before. He peppered her with questions and she explained everything, loving the way his face seemed to glow with happiness for her.

He went over to the credenza then and extracted a large flat package wrapped in shiny red paper with a white bow.

"This seems as good a time as any," he said, handing it to her.

"Oh, Matthew!" It was a book, glossy and gorgeous, on the art of stained glass as executed by the miraculous Marc Chagall, the kind of elegant luxury she had never been able to afford. "It's magnificent," she breathed, "but how

did you know how long I've loved Chagall and coveted this book?"

Matt smiled, his blue eyes crinkling into a starburst of fine lines. One afternoon the week before he'd driven to Arthur's Art Supplies and spent a few hours learning about stained-glass art.

She flipped to the flyleaf, focusing on the words written in Matt's sharp, angular script:

For Lainie:

To all you are and for all you will become—

With love,
Matthew

She rested the palm of her hand on his words. *I love you, Matthew*, she thought. *Can't you see it?*

"This may sound odd," she said slowly, "but I think your inscription means even more to me than this marvelous book." She smiled. "I hope I can live up to your expectations."

"What about your own?" he asked. "What do you see for yourself now that you've reached the big three-oh?"

She groaned. "Gray hair, mostly."

Matt laughed, but continued to press his point. "Get serious, Randall." He pulled her into his arms, feeling the softness of her breasts as they pressed against his chest. "Is it so hard to see?"

She gently brushed her cheek against his shoulder.

"No," she answered simply, "it isn't."

She looked up, her eyes tracing the swell of his mouth beneath the sandy mustache. In a swift motion, she buried her fingers in the cool silk of his dark blond hair and pulled his mouth down to meet hers.

Her tongue slipped along his lower lip, then she gently nipped the flesh with her teeth, making him gasp. It was more than physical desire that had turned her into the passionately seeking woman she was right then. All of the fear she'd known that day—fears of losing him to accident

or argument—had turned into an all-consuming void that needed to be filled by him. Only him.

"Oh, God, Matthew," she murmured, her lips warm against his skin. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. I hate that bike."

"Nothing will happen to me," he said between short, sweetly nipping kisses. "I'll stop riding, if that's what you want."

She returned his caresses, her hands slipping inside the collar of his shirt, seeking the crisp curls on his chest.

"I want you safe," she murmured. "I want you happy...."

He pulled her down on the plush green carpeting. "And I want you *now*."

Clothes suddenly piled up near the foot of the sofa until they were both nude, bodies entwined as a slight breeze rustled the curtains.

Lainie felt as if someone had just handed her a gift, as if this moment with Matthew were the finest thing she would ever own. Her senses reeled and she was only dimly aware of her own pleasure when it rippled through her body, for she was concentrated solely on Matthew, intent on showing him with hands and hips and mouth, all that she felt and would always feel for him.

"I think we've set a dangerous precedent," Matt said later as they lay on top of the bed in his room, where they'd adjourned when the carpet became too scratchy.

Lainie, drowsy with pleasure, nestled her nose closer to the joint of his arm and shoulder.

"Doesn't seem so dangerous to me," she murmured lazily, incapable of more coherent speech.

"We seem to be unable to have dinner together. Every time we try, we end up like this."

She lifted up on one elbow and drew strands of glossy black hair across his chest and belly, loving the way his mus-

cles quivered. "Any objections?" she asked.

"I *am* a man of honor," he said, pulling her body on top of his until her face hovered just above his, "and I *did* promise you dinner. How about a pizza from Mamma Ventura's. Pepperoni, extra cheese, and 'Happy Birthday' spelled out in anchovies."

Her gray eyes went silvery with love and laughter. "And Luciano Pavarotti to deliver it?"

"If he's available."

Lainie had just finished showering when she heard the front doorbell. Matt had clearly returned before she was through.

The doorbell chimed again.

"Hold your horses, Matthew!" she called out as she hurried downstairs, wrapping his enormous white bathrobe around her body.

She pushed her wet hair off her face and opened the door.

"Did you get Pavarotti to—" she began.

"I'm not Pavarotti," said the tall man with curly dark hair, "but I'd be happy to sing a few selections for you. You look confused." His wide grin revealed large, very white teeth. "That's the New Yorker in me. Wisecracks first, explanations second." He extended his right hand. "I'm Mike Ortiz, Ward's agent. We spoke last night when Matt pretended he wasn't in."

The man was so disarming that Lainie had to laugh.

"I remember," she said. "I'm Lainie Randall."

Mike followed her into the living room and sat down while she fixed him a Scotch and ice.

"Enjoy your drink while I change—" she indicated the bathrobe "—into something a little *less* comfortable."

He nodded. "Will do."

Five minutes later she joined Mike in the cheery yellow living room. Scooter

was comfortably curled next to him, her fuzzy gray head resting on his lap.

"I can see you're old friends," Lainie said. "She doesn't usually bother with too many people."

"We go way back," Mike answered. "I was with Ward the day he picked her up on the road." Mike took a swallow of Scotch then placed the glass down. "It was a couple weeks after his accident. We were on the way to the hospital for another round of physical therapy when we found her. She'd been hit by a car and someone had put her on the grassy shoulder." He shook his head. "To die in comfort, I guess. Matt had me put her in the car and take her to the animal hospital. They patched her up in a week, and before you knew it, he had himself this old girl. You could say they recuperated together."

"The only difference is, Scooter's back to normal." Lainie's words slipped out before she had time to censor herself.

Mike nodded. "We seem to be on the same length. Tell me, is he hiding out in the garage or something?"

She laughed. "No, Mike. He just went out for pizza." She was about to continue when she heard a rapping on the front door and a familiar deep voice.

"Open up, woman, before I drop something."

Her stomach turned inside out as she got up and went to open the door.

He came in balancing the pizza box on the hall table while he pulled a small bottle of Asti Spumante from his pocket. Before she could answer, he asked, "Whose car is that outside?"

"So, how you doing, Ward?"

At the sound of Mike's voice, Matt spun around and the split of Italian champagne fell to the carpet.

She saw the look of shock pass swiftly across his face, then be replaced by a curtailed look of apprehension.

"You don't give up, do you, Ortiz?"

Mike drew the younger man into a bear hug and Lainie felt her nerves relax a little. "Not on you, Ward."

They moved into the living room.

"I don't want to be rude," Matt said, pouring himself a bourbon, "but this is a private party, Mike. What if we speak tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Mike's thick dark brows arched. "We need to talk now, Matt, and we're going to."

The tension in the air was so highly sparked that the hair on the back of Lainie's neck stood on end. She cleared her throat.

"Listen, why don't you two just talk. I can take the pizza into the kitchen and keep it warm in the oven."

Matt pulled her close in a quick embrace. "This is one hell of a birthday for you, kiddo," he murmured. "But you don't have to leave the room. There's nothing I can't say in front of you."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "You two have your talk and I'll put some coffee on."

The kitchen was in the back of the house, and while she fed Scooter, who had followed her there, and started the water boiling for coffee, she found herself straining for the sound of their voices in the living room.

Out there, her immediate future was being decided. Mike Ortiz was trying to convince Matthew to leave Gettysburg, to return to the glamour and pain of baseball. If he went back, he would be once again sucked into that whirlpool of activity that surrounded professional athletics and she would lose him.

Stay here, she thought as she carried a tray with coffee and cups into the living room. *Let us get to know one another better. Let me show you how I feel.*

The atmosphere in the living room had changed. She recognized that immediately as she placed the tray down.

"Coffee, gentlemen?" She tried to keep her voice light and even.

Matt grabbed her wrist, drawing her to his chair where she sat down on the edge.

"I'm not going back, Lainie." His voice was quiet. "I've decided to stay here and take a teaching job."

"Are you sure about it, Matthew?"

Before he could answer, Mike Ortiz broke in.

"Tell her, Ward. Tell her you're sure. And tell *me* you don't still love the game." Mike's voice was softer than Lainie had ever heard it. "Tell me you're tired of it, tell me you're bored with it, and I'll put in your resignation immediately." He patted the younger man on the shoulder. "I don't think you can."

Matt stood and walked over to the window. He said nothing.

Mike sighed. "You have three weeks to make up your mind, Matt. I'll give you until August eighth. Call me."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to leave, but Matt grabbed his arm.

"Thanks," Matt said, embracing the man in a tight quick hug. "Thanks for giving a damn."

Lainie watched, feeling hot tears burn her eyes.

"I'm not the only one who does, Ward," Mike said, his gruffness belying the look of affection in his eyes. "Lots of people care and want you back. It doesn't have to be like it was before."

Matt, obviously near tears, turned and faced the window again. Mike followed Lainie to the front door.

"I nearly had him," he said as they said good-night on the front porch. "He was this close to coming back and I lost him." He shot Lainie a measured look. "I think he backed out because of you."

"Nonsense," Lainie said. "He's his own man. He makes his own decisions."

Mike smiled wearily. "Maybe so, but you were one hell of a factor. Too bad you weren't behind him when this happened. He'd be back there playing damned good baseball if he'd had you in his corner."

Lainie shook his hand. "I'm in Matt's corner no matter what he decides to do. If he wants to stay here and teach, that's fine with me."

"Too bad," Mike said. "I hate to see him waste his talent."

He waved to her as he turned toward his car. "Treat him good," he said. "He's a damned fine boy."

"I know he is," she answered. "I'll treat him just fine."

IT DIDN'T make any sense, Lainie thought as she urged the Camaro along the highway into Gettysburg. No matter how you added up the facts—her new job, Matt's decision to leave baseball, the prospect of being near each other—they came out saying she should be happy.

And yet in the eight days since she'd accepted Deborah James's offer and Matt had decided to pursue a teaching career, a soggy blanket of depression had settled securely over her shoulders.

Lainie had just spent two days in Lancaster doing some preliminary work with the architect of the condominium where she'd be providing the stained-glass work. Maybe she needed to see Matthew, to talk with him. Once she found herself in his arms again she would feel centered and all of these nagging feelings of unease would disappear like a bad dream.

She was impatiently waiting for the traffic light near the southwest corner of the Elliot College playing field when the Camaro sputtered, clunked, then died. Damn. It looked like she was going to end her summer the way it had begun: with car trouble. She turned and was about to start walking toward Ethan's house when she caught sight of a familiar red car parked at the far end of the field. The Thunderbird. She peered in its direction.

There, perhaps two hundred feet away, was Matt, unmistakably tall and golden, surrounded by a crowd of young men who seemed, at least from this distance,

to hang on his every word. He seemed to be explaining something to them—some fine points, perhaps, about batting—as he changed position, batting first lefty then righty, moving into each pitch with precision and grace.

There was no mistaking the ease with which he held himself or the joy that was visible in his every movement. He looked the way she felt when a design was going well and each cut piece of glass seemed blessed with power and beauty. She wrapped her arms around her chest as she watched. For the first time in the nearly two months she'd known him, he looked totally right, totally happy. She wondered if perhaps he'd be leaving a big part of himself behind along with baseball.

"DON'T BE HURT, Matthew." Lainie turned her head on the pillow and faced him a few hours later. "I think I'm just overtired, that's all."

He reached down and pulled the sheet up over their bodies and drew her closer to him. "You were too much for me," he said, his voice low as he stroked her hair, letting the heavy silk of it slip through his fingers. "If you give me a few minutes, maybe I can make it up to you."

She sat up, wrapped the sheet around her. "I don't keep score, Matthew. I loved making love with you. I loved feeling close to you, being part of you. Believe it or not, sometimes that's enough."

He exhaled long and slow. It was almost a sigh. "It's not enough for me," he said.

"What's the matter, Matthew?" she asked, her voice gentle. "I've had the feeling all evening that we haven't been really connecting."

"Obviously we haven't been," he said, alluding to their lovemaking.

"I don't mean here in bed," she answered. "All evening I've had the feeling you weren't really here."

He smiled. "I'm here, all right. All one hundred and eighty pounds of me."

In the dusky early evening light it was hard for her to read his expression.

"Did anything happen while I was away?" she asked. "Did Mike call again?"

Matt shook his head. "Why should he? I made my decision."

As he spoke, she saw him again as he had been that afternoon on the ball field. The thought of how perfect he looked as he swung into a pitch.

She reached for his bathrobe and slipped it on. Then she switched on the small lamp on the nightstand.

"Come on, Lainie," Matt groaned. "Turn that thing off."

"No." The firmness in her voice made him look at her. "I have something to say to you, Matthew, and I need to see your eyes."

He opened his eyes fully.

She was sitting tailor-fashion on the bed in front of him, wrapped safely in his robe. "I'm going to butt in to your life, Matthew. I'm going to tell you exactly what I think you should do."

He grinned. This was so unlike her that he was certain a punchline was right around the corner. "Go ahead," he said.

She took a deep breath. "Go back to Boston. You don't belong here, Matt. You belong on the ball field."

A curtain dropped over his blue eyes. "Is this some clever kind of kiss-off?" he asked.

She touched his arm. "I saw you this afternoon near the school." She forced him to meet her eyes. "It was so perfect that it nearly took my breath away."

He had relaxed slightly. "You have a thing for washed-up ball players?"

She shook her head. "No. I have a thing for men who have the courage to try again. Asking you to give up baseball would be like asking me to give up art. You'd be giving up the very thing that makes you what you are." She took a deep, shuddery breath. "You'd be giving up the very thing that makes you the man I love."

His head jerked up as if a shot of electricity had jolted through him. "Would you care to run that by me again? I want to be sure I heard right."

She crawled over next to him and took his face in her hands. "I love you, Matthew. I think I've loved you from the first day I saw you hunched over that motorcycle. You're the man I've waited all my life to find."

He pulled her across his lap, his hands seeking the warmth of her flesh beneath his robe. "So why send me away?" he asked. "If we're in love, we should be together. If I take that teaching job at Elliot, we won't have to be separated."

She pulled away from him. "Teaching will always be there, Matthew. Baseball won't. You have a talent and an opportunity millions of men would sell their souls for."

He drew one hand through his dark blond hair. "You don't know what you're asking of me. The kind of life ball players lead..."

She laughed. "You think I don't know about groupies and all the other things that go on? Everyone knows, Matt. I also know about personal integrity and commitment. It doesn't worry me. I know the kind of man you are."

He leaned back against the headboard and watched this passionate woman he loved. "I'm scared," he said, simply. "I'm scared of falling flat on my ass out there in front of millions of people."

She moved to sit on the edge of the bed next to him. "And if you do, I'll be right there to pick you up again: You'd do it for me."

He took her hand and held it tightly. "What if I don't like it anymore?"

"Even then, you'll know you quit because it wasn't right for you, not because you were too fearful to try."

"I'm trying to find a hole in your logic," he said ruefully, "but damned if I can." He pulled her close to him. "How did you get so smart?"

She pressed a kiss against the hair-roughened flesh of his chest. "I've been there," she answered. "A wise woman once told me that, in a marriage, two halves never make a perfect whole. It takes two complete persons joined together to form a perfect marriage."

He looked deep into her gray eyes and saw nothing but love. "Is that a proposal of marriage, Ms. Randall?"

With a soft laugh, she balanced on one knee on the soft bed. "I guess it is," she answered. "Will you, Matthew Ward, marry me, Lainie Randall, as soon as the current baseball season is over?"

"I haven't said I'm going back," he said.

"You are," she said. "It's in your blood."

"As are you," he answered, growing serious. "My love. My wife."

Lainie sat up and switched off the light, sending the room once more into darkness. She didn't need to see his eyes now. She knew what was there.

"I love you, Matthew. I always will."

THE ROAR of the crowd was as he remembered it: an all-encompassing tunnel of sound.

He stepped up to the plate, feeling the heat from the lights. He bent his knees and settled into the familiar stance as if he'd been at the plate just yesterday, rather than two years ago.

He never thought he'd be there again, playing the games of summer. God, how he'd missed it.

In a box seat behind first base, she clenched her hands together, unaware even of the older man and woman next to her who suffered with each pitch nearly as much as she did. *Let him be strong*, she thought. *Let him be whole.*

The count was two balls and two strikes.

The ball was coming toward him, rolling in the air, fat and white. It was his. He knew it in the split second it took to reach his bat. He dug down, stepped into

the pitch and *crack!* The air split with the sound and the ball flew out over the head of the pitcher, bouncing into the outfield for a stand-up double.

The cheers of the crowd enveloped him like a warm caress, but one that was fleeting. Reality was the woman who

loved him, whose deep gray eyes held all the secrets he'd ever need to know.

When the cheering stopped, she sat down and brushed away some tears, then got ready to watch the rest of the game.

She knew they would both get safely home.

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STAR SIGNS—MARCH & APRIL

LIBRA September 23–October 22



A more leisurely time is to be had now, which makes up for the hectic pace of past weeks! A close friend is having financial problems at the moment and may need you to listen to their worries, although not necessarily to actually help. An old friend turns up now and may cause some jealousy in your life

SCORPIO October 23–November 22



Your social life really is in top gear now and boy, are you making the most of it! An unexpected contact will help your career or any ambitions you have, so be prepared for anything and you'll find it easier to cope with this exciting time. Make the most of this great month!

SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22



Someone comes into your life around the 5th who will have a big influence on you in the future. Inspiration is at its peak now, and you can seem to do no wrong, so this is a good time to try anything that needs methodical thinking. A breakthrough at work comes as a big surprise and you really do feel as if absolutely nothing can go wrong!

CAPRICORN December 23–January 22



Tension on the home front leaves a few nerves frayed at the edges but it will come to a head and things will eventually get sorted out, though not fast enough as far as you are concerned! Home is not where you want to be this month, and it won't hurt to get away for a while after things have been sorted out.

AQUARIUS January 23–February 22



You seem to be shouldering a lot of responsibility at the moment, and this seems to be getting you down. Why not share some of it with someone you trust and this will lead to positive changes in certain areas of your life.

PISCES February 23–March 22



Finances and relationships look set to change now and this really couldn't come at a better time. Any new ambitions look set to materialize, but be careful not to jump in at the deep end as things may need clarifying before you make any big decisions.

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**ARIES March 23–April 22**

You feel the need for plenty of space at the start of the month so why not take it, though life may be even more hectic toward the end of the month because of it! A lack of confidence now comes at a time when you really need to boost your ego; things can only get better!

**TAURUS April 23–May 22**

Too little action at the start of this month gets you down slightly, but be patient because some exciting news may be coming your way. An important decision must be made so don't let anyone sidetrack you into putting it off.

**GEMINI May 23–June 21**

A past error returns to haunt you, but with patience you can solve any dilemma you may find yourself in. Pressures and demands seem to be in the forefront of your life at the moment, but you'll have a great sense of achievement when they are finally sorted out.

**CANCER June 22–July 22**

Plans that include your partner look set to change course but this doesn't mean that you'll each go your separate ways! Talk things through and make sure you are both truthful to each other and you won't go far wrong.

**LEO July 23–August 22**

A supportive partner is a great asset at the start of the month when you begin to find things heavygoing. A surprise is in store midmonth and this could lead to fulfilling a longed-for dream or ambition. All in all, the outlook is very bright for you now!

**VIRGO August 23–September 22**

Believe in your own instincts at the start of this month and don't let other people try and talk you into anything you don't want to do. But expert advice may be needed around the 10th when you have to give in for a change and actually ask for help! Not something you enjoy doing!

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Romances

"WORLD'S BEST ROMANCES"

SUMMER SONG • Rita Clay

She wanted a baby but she didn't want a husband, and Caro thought she had the ideal solution. With the help of her doctor and her lawyer, she would get the family she had always wanted. J. T. Cole had different ideas, however. He was perfectly willing to give Caro a child, but only the time-honored method would do for him. The hardest thing for Caro to accept was that once she had met J.T., nothing but love would do for her, either.

THE RIGHT MOVES • Arlene James

Angie Faulkner had sunk every penny into Strawberry, her prizewinning roan. Their life was the rodeo circuit...and she'd convince that ornery cowboy, Rafferty Sharpstone, she'd fit in with his crazy ropers. But after falling in love with that long-legged hunk of a man, could she convince him that a woman—Angie especially—wasn't a threat to a man trying a comeback on the rodeo circuit?

**Look for these stories
and *many more* in
future issues!**

ACROSS

1. Position
6. Thick cord
10. Curved structure
14. Work
15. Female sheep
16. Marco ____
17. Musical drama
18. Dispatched
19. Drop heavily
20. Wager
21. Metal grating
23. Declare as true without proof
25. "Masked" mammal
26. Fasten
27. Myth
30. Ooze
32. Make lace
35. Baking appliances
36. Ancient
37. One of several steps
39. Fender nick
40. Signify agreement
41. Otherwise
42. Grain to be ground
44. Doll, e.g.
45. Spins
46. Look at
47. At the highest point
49. Makes taut
50. Perfect serve
51. Smears
52. Motive
55. Roman garb
56. Disencumber
59. Paddles
60. Astounds
62. Barter
64. Birch or pine

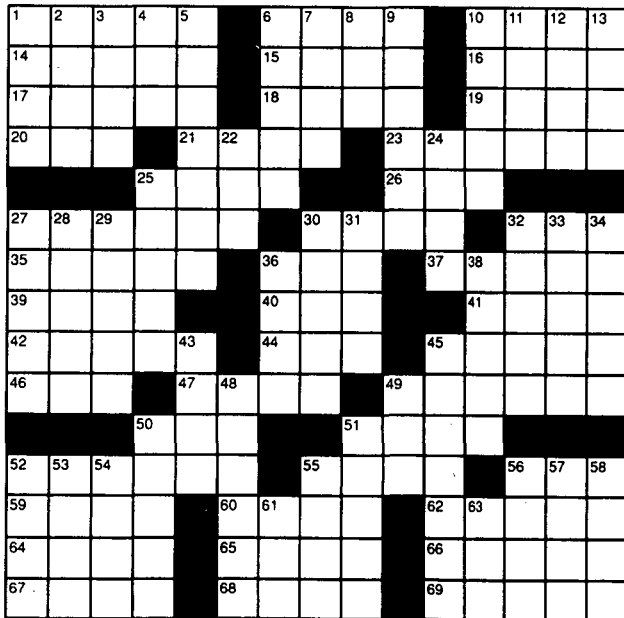
65. Snout
66. Roof edges
67. Bed board
68. Toddlers
69. Go furtively

DOWN

1. Messy one
2. Record
3. Help
4. Neither's partner
5. Fire-breathing beasts
6. Varnish ingredient
7. Was indebted to
8. Female swan
9. Fortune
10. Pie fruit
11. Character
12. Obstruct
13. Comedian Bob
22. Pole
24. Mouth edges
25. Pennies
27. Hut
28. All
29. Aladdin's helper
30. Single-masted ship
31. Whirlpool
32. Stories
33. Narrow passageway
34. Lock of hair
36. Aware of
38. Adolescents
43. Folded tortilla dish
45. Money-back offers
48. Apartment-dweller

49. Label
50. Thing of value
51. Medicine amounts
52. Decomposes
53. Nobleman
54. Zone
55. Trial
56. Speak wildly
57. Thought
58. Hotel counter
61. Court
63. Operated

Solution on page 106 of this issue.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

Romances

ANNETTE BROADRICK—Adam's Story

Caitlin Moran had an ability to see what others couldn't, which brought nothing but grief. Then, one night, a vision of violence brought her Adam St. Clair—and a desire for fulfillment. While helping the handsome Texan search for the man who had betrayed him, she discovered passion. Would she be able to save his life, or would the love that she found end in heartbreak?

DIANA PALMER—Room Full of Roses

Only one thing stood in the way of Wynn Ascot's marriage—her legal guardian, McCabe Foxe. A hardheaded journalist, Wynn was uncharacteristically devastated by the new, disturbing feelings McCabe aroused. But he was a man who made no commitments and asked for none. With Wynn it was all or nothing, and though her heart had already been captured, the surrender would have to be on her terms.

GINNA GRAY—Golden Illusion

When Claire Andrews, widow of one senator and daughter of another, agreed to run for her husband's vacant Senate seat, she did not intend to be the figurehead that her party—and Matt Drummond—expected. If the newspaper heir wanted to become her campaign manager, he'd have to learn she was well-informed and capable. Matt learned that and more; underneath Claire's cool beauty was an explosive passion that only he could arouse.

BARBARA BRETTON—The Sweetest of Debts

Lainie Randall was shocked by Rita's engagement. Not that Ethan Ward wasn't nice, but surely her aunt knew that marriage only hurt people. Matthew Ward was delighted by his father's engagement but he understood Lainie's feelings. Matt too knew emotional injuries but unlike Lainie, he believed that love could heal, restore, renew. Suddenly it became important for him to prove it—both for Lainie's sake and his own...